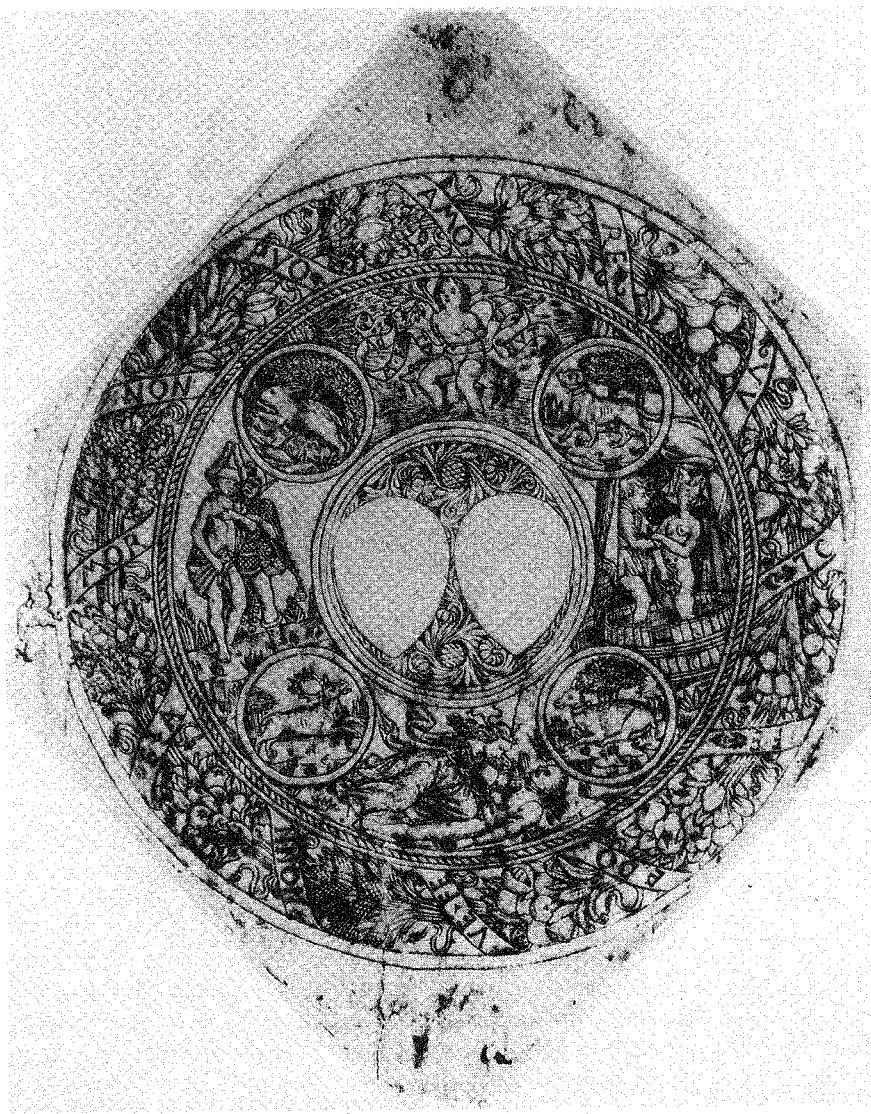


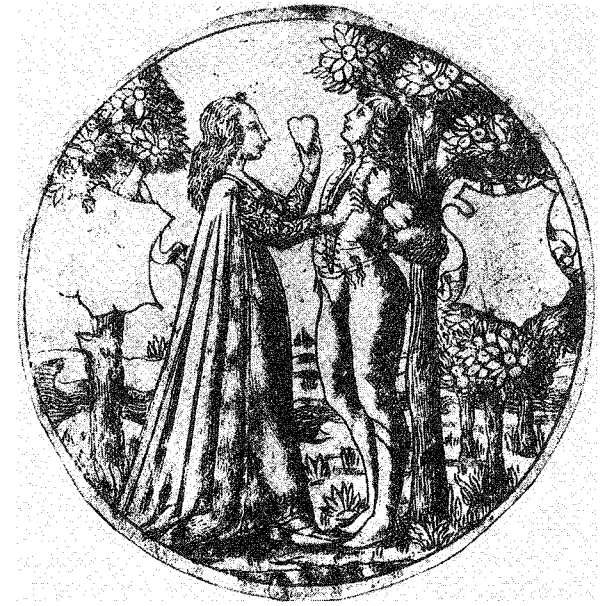
To this date feminist scholarship addressing the representation of women in fifteenth-century Italian, and especially Tuscan art has concentrated on images of the submission, disgrace and often physical anguish of their female protagonists. Scholars, drawn to the very rich iconographies on marriage chest and *spalliera* panels have discussed the trials of Lucretia, Griselda, Eurydice, Susanna, inter alia. These paintings, adorning the chests in which women transported their belongings to their husband's new houses, or decorating the bedrooms of newlyweds, were obviously considered to be a very apt location for the encoding of gendered norms. Moreover, given that these panels would remain in the domestic environment of the bride, they would serve to remind her of those norms for quite some time after the marriage. Nevertheless, reliance on this artistic genre renders studies staking broad claims regarding the status of women and gender relations in general somewhat problematic. Often explicitly renounced through postmodern appeals to „discourse“ and „gender“, an implicit metaphor of reflection haunts such studies. Although the repetition of disempowering iconographies in such paintings does appear to reflect contemporary disempowerments in actual social realities, the means through which art elaborated gender relations cannot be characterised through metaphors of reflection alone. Women were disempowered, but the visual arts were not only a reflection of this disempowerment, or, through negative iconographies, a catalyst toward female disempowerment.

Looking at an iconography that one finds on another type of wedding gift, the small box or coffer, I would like to argue that an alternate female protagonist was available to the female viewer: a powerful, self-assured and somewhat violent model of feminine comportment. This dominating woman figures in images dating to the 1460s and 1470s in which men are shown tied or prone, while a female character opens his chest and removes his heart. This representational empowerment of women did not correspond to any actual empowerments, but rather served to produce a novel form of masculinity in which men presented themselves as vulnerable and at the mercy of women. Decorating small coffers bearing gifts, the image of the disempowered male body served to mask the real relations undergirding the marital exchanges in which the bridegroom was clearly dominant. In a wider sense, this new masculinity was part of a broader cultural shift in which the curbed male body came to function as a means of anchoring male authority through apparent necessity.

At the bottom of one of the so-called Otto prints (Fig. 1) one finds the image of a woman kneeling atop a prone male figure.<sup>1</sup> She appears to open up his jerkin. With considerable realism, the artist has shown her literally prizing open the chest of the man. This image of female aggression does not appear to match the dominant characterization of women represented in the visual arts in this period,



1 Four Love Scenes and Animals, Florentine Engraving, c. 1464-78, British Museum, London



2 Woman Removing a Man's Heart, Florentine Engraving, c. 1464-78, British Museum, London

in which femininity's visual disempowerment is usually seen as acting to „engage with and reinforce cultural assumptions about the role of men and women and their relative access to speech and exemplary action.“<sup>2</sup>

The engraving on which we find this scene is a compendium of various amorous themes and symbols. A circular field is defined by a wreath; an intertwined banderole reads: AMORE VVOL FE E DOVE FE NONN E AMORE NON PVO („Love requires loyalty, and where there is not loyalty, there is no love“). In the center of the print, we find two empty shields. Voids such as these have prompted art historians since Warburg to conclude that this and all the other Otto prints refer in some manner to marriage: the two shields would later be filled in with the appropriate heraldic devices of the bride and bridegroom. Moreover, the shape of the prints – round and oval – suggests that they were perhaps used to decorate the little boxes that male lovers bestowed upon the objects of their affection. Between the wreath and the central 'oculus' containing the empty shields is a band with four subsidiary scenes and four roundels. In the roundels are animals associated with the hunt. To the left and right of center we are made privy to scenes of lovemaking. In the upper field, we find a man in shorts, his arms tied behind his back and to a tree. In the lower section we find the image of the woman on top of the man.<sup>3</sup>

We witness a similar narrative on a second Otto print (Fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> A woman to the left, dressed in a long cape stands before a young man, tied to a tree. These central figures are flanked by two, large empty shields, certainly intended for heraldic elaboration. With her right hand, the woman holds open the man's jerkin, reveal-

ing a hole in his chest. In her left hand, she bears a heart. While she dispassionately stares forward, the man's eyes are raised heavenward in, perhaps, ecstasy.

These images of masculinity restrained and the forceful removal of the heart, demonstrate a striking difference from the established medieval visual norm known as the „exchange of hearts“, in which a male lover offers his heart to his beloved. This iconography shows up quite often in various media. One example is, perhaps, particularly illuminating: the lid of a small, round coffer painted by Domenico di Bartolo.<sup>5</sup> On this lid we see a man voluntarily giving his heart to his rather imposing female companion. It is suggestive that we find this symbolic version of gift-giving on the cover of a box. It will be recalled that the Otto prints, too, are often thought to have served as decorative covers for such *scatoline* or *goffanucci*. The function of these little boxes is not altogether clear, but in a sermon of 1424, San Bernardino refers to „... that little box that you, women, have with you when you go to marry: that small one, I am not speaking of those large ones; you know that you hold inside them your ring, pearls, jewels and other similar things.“<sup>6</sup> Bernardino's description suggests that in Tuscany, at least, these boxes were intended to contain the sometimes extraordinarily expensive jewels comprising part of the extra-dotal gifts from groom to bride, known, in legal terms, as the „counter-donora“.<sup>7</sup> The bestowal or removal of the heart would appear to be a symbolic sublimation of the elaborate exchanges that took place between bride and bridegroom during the long marriage process. Before making such claims, however, it is necessary to point out that the iconography possesses a long and complex history.

The literary image of the removal of the heart in the two prints here reproduced derives directly from a trope found in the writings of Dante and Boccaccio. The locus classicus is to be found in Dante's *Vita Nuova*, in which the narrator/poet describes a nocturnal visit by Lord Love. Dante's second encounter with Beatrice, when she greeted him, caused him to fall into an ecstatic stupor. While sleeping Cupid, or Lord Love appeared to him bearing the sleeping figure of Beatrice. Dante imagines Cupid offering his burning heart to Beatrice, who „ate of it timidly.“<sup>8</sup> This dream sequence in which Beatrice, at the instigation of Lord Love, ingests Dante's/the narrator's heart, centers on the male protagonist's plight.<sup>9</sup> Love, we are to understand, has little to do with volition; rather, at the mercy of divine forces, and of women, men's hearts are ensnared and consumed.

In his *Amorosa Visione*, possibly the direct source for the Otto print showing a clothed man tied to a tree, Boccaccio revisits the topos, giving it a slightly more human, and less allegorical aspect:

As I stood there it seems to me that  
the gentle lady seemed to be coming towards me  
to open my breast and write within,  
there in my heart, placed so as to suffer,  
her beautiful name in letters of gold,  
so that it might never escape.<sup>10</sup>

Dante and Boccaccio inherited an ancient trope. Based on Platonic valorization of the spiritual aspects of the heart, Aristotelian physiology, literary imagery from Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Arabic love poetry and, above all, the symbolic world of Provençale and Northern French amorous topoi, the scene of the lover's heart being removed by his female beloved might have triggered a number of possible responses in its audience.<sup>11</sup> The strongest association, however, might have been religious. The mock-violent and often rapturous removal of the heart was a central theme in religious mysticism. Autopsies of religious men and women revealed hearts inscribed with the name of Jesus, implying the type of heart exchange common in secular poetry.<sup>12</sup> The Tuscan saint, Catherine of Siena, provided the most prominent point of reference for this type of cross-discursive mixing. In his *Leggenda maior* of 1398, Raymond of Capua, St. Catherine's confessor and amanuensis, described a number of the saint's miraculous meetings with Christ. One in particular was striking for its marital symbolism. The mystical wedding of the fourteenth-century saint consisted, also, in the two protagonists swapping hearts. Jesus, to whom Catherine had offered her heart since childhood, took it. The next day he returned and replaced it with his own.<sup>13</sup>

Within the tropics of love, it is the male body that undergoes the mystical experience. In the Otto prints introduced above, it is the restrained and submissive man who, at the mercy of a symbolic woman, loses his heart. What is perhaps most intriguing is the somewhat violent nature of this loss. No longer representing the „Offering of the Heart“ so common in the literature of courtly love, here a new type of gender relation is suggested. I believe that our concentration on the construction of female roles in the visual arts has, perhaps, skewed our perception of such problems. By setting 'women' under the historical microscope, studies emphasizing their disempowerment or empowerment in the visual arts have underestimated the pervasiveness of patriarchy's concentration on itself. Thus, it seems salutary to cast the spotlight on masculinity and its attempt to generate, retain and mask its claims to authority.

I would like to conclude by proposing two possible readings of the restrained masculinity witnessed in the two Otto prints introduced above. First of all, the appearance of this vulnerable male body on images apparently to be viewed by women on boxes containing marriage or betrothal gifts suggests that the imagery ought to be considered as addressing the way in which those gifts interpellated the bride as a debtor. These images of the removal of the heart would appear to refer to the imbalanced economy of gift-giving at marriage in which the bride's body became a repository for the public signs of wealth and prestige associated with the union. In fifteenth-century Florence, religious and political authorities railed against the rapacity of women and their insatiable desires for material satisfaction. These prints, representing men tied-up or attacked, might be read as constructing a view of masculinity as controlled by women.

Second, the passive and vulnerable male body seen in the prints appeals to the viewer for pity, claiming a positive moral status. At the mercy of his beloved, the moping and doomed man wishes to enlist our support. His donna is hard and unforgiving. He

is a servant to a fate beyond his control. The Amazonian woman possesses an ambivalent role in this moral configuration. On the one hand, in rejecting and tormenting her admirer, she represents the enemy; nonetheless, we are meant to share in the „narrator's“ belief in her ultimate, if not incomparable worthiness. This vulnerable male body is a partisan construction. It is understood that the reader/viewer should interpret the vulnerable body of the narrator/lover as a reflection of male emotions, and not as a literal reflection of events. Set within the broad frame of marital iconographies, this definition of the male body as vulnerable and subject to the inexorable power of a woman represents a very different image of gender relations than that often discussed in studies devoted to disempowered female protagonists. This body, moreover, is part of a larger representational trend toward a controlled and subdued masculinity. Visible in images of Christ, St. Sebastian, David, and Cupid, it is my belief that c. 1460-70 Florentines developed this submissive male form in response to changing social and political circumstances in which male authority was no longer based solely upon representations of explicit power, but rather rationalized and founded upon apparent necessity. Seen as vulnerable and in need of stabilization, masculinity guaranteed its claims to authority through representing itself as threatened.<sup>14</sup>

- 1 A. M. Hind: *Early Italian Engraving*. London 1938, A.IV.12.
- 2 C. Baskins: *Corporeal Authority in the Speaking Picture: the Representation of Lucretia in Tuscan Domestic Painting*. In: *Gender Rhetorics*. Ed. R. C. Trexler. Binghamton, NY 1994, p. 190. In another fascinating article (*Gender Trouble in Italian Renaissance Art History: Two Case Studies*. In: *Studies in Iconography* 16, 1994, pp. 1-35) Baskins destabilizes masculine and feminine so as to offer female viewers a less heterosexist and blunt choice between possible models for identification.
- 3 A similar image, bearing the inscription CRVDA FERVM PECTV SACIA, can be found on a niello print now in the Louvre.
- 4 Hind (as note 1), A.IV.15.
- 5 See Domenico di Bartolo, *The Offering of the Heart*, lid of a coffer, formerly in the Schlossmuseum, Berlin (see P. Toesca: *Una scatola dipinta da Domenico di Bartolo*. In: *Rassegna d'Arte Senesi* 13, 1920, pp. 107-108).
- 6 *Le prediche volgari inedite*. Ed. P. D. Paçetti. Siena 1935, p. 413.
- 7 See my *Performing the Bridal Body in Fifteenth-Century Florence*. In: *Art History* (forthcoming).
- 8 D. Aligheri: *Vita Nuova*. Tr. Mark Musa. Bloomington/London 1973, pp. 5-6.
- 9 G. Ceccione: *La leggenda del cuore mangiato*. In: *Rivista Contemporanea* 1, 1888, pp. 336 ff.
- 10 G. Boccaccio: *Amorosa Visione*. Tr. R. Hollander/I. Hampton/M. Frankel. Hanover, NH/London 1986, XLV, pp. 1 ff.
- 11 R. H. Cline: *Heart and Eyes*. In: *Romance Philology* 25, November 1971, H. 2, pp. 263-97; see also H. Kolb: *Der Begriff der Minne und das Entstehen der höfischen Lyrik*. Tübingen 1958, pp. 18-38.
- 12 See, for example, K. Park: *The Criminal and the Saintly Body: Autopsy and Dissection in Renaissance Italy*. In: *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, 1994, H. 1, pp. 2, 3 and 22; *The Florentine Fior di Virtù of 1491*. Tr. N. Fersin. Washington 1953, p. 22.
- 13 R. Fawtier: *Sainte Catherine de Sienne*. Paris 1921, p. 9.
- 14 See my *Cupido cruciatur and the Medici*. In: *Le mariage à la Renaissance*. Ed. Claudie Balavoine. Tours (forthcoming).