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THE AGENCY OF BEDS:
EARLY MODERN VISIONS OF A 'BRIGHT' FURNITURE

Beds Are Not Only Used at Nighttime

There seems to be a natural connection between the night and the need for sleep and thus for a bed. If we leave our Eurocentric view, however, it becomes clear that this function is not mandatory: in many cultures, people sleep on the floor, on a mat or a carpet¹. In this respect, the question arises of the special nature of European beds, which in the early modern period partly turned into luxury items with important representative functions, as I will show in the following. To facilitate an understanding of these alternative purposes, it is helpful to look at the different historical conceptions of the terms 'private' and 'public'. Even before the recent pandemic, these spheres were no longer as clearly separated owing to the possibilities of working on mobile devices: beds had become a working space². In general, nonetheless, the bed as a concept remains tied to an everyday understanding of intimacy and privacy – a development that gained prominence only in the nineteenth century. Prior to that, it had been a more polyvalent sphere serving a variety of functions, not only during nighttime. The bed became a key item for social distinction and dynastic representation, as well as an object

1. Carol Worthmann, Melissa K. Melby, «Toward a Comparative Developmental Ecology of Human Sleep», in Mary A. Carskadon (ed.), *Adolescent Sleep Patterns: Biological, Social, and Psychological Influences*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 69–117.

2. Beatriz Colomina, Andreas Rumpfhuber, August Ruhs (eds.), *The Century of the Bed*, Wien, Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2014.

with which magical and spiritual ideas were associated. Thus, especially for the upper social classes, it belonged definitively to the “bright side of the night”. As the following material shows, the bed was seen as precious and important, a place for resting and healing, and for sensual pleasure, as well as a sacred sphere allowing visions and ecstasies.

Sources

Access to this multilayered sphere is possible only to a limited extent because many of the beds from this period have not survived, which is attributed either to their above-average size or to poor materials³. The sources offered by the history of art are mostly pictorial representations, each of which must be situated in its own historical, social, and media-specific context. Until the sixteenth century, depictions of beds in Italy, for example, are very often in daylight, whereas in northern art we have night scenes as early as the fifteenth century. Only when *chiaroscuro* became established as one of the most attractive ways of painting did the representation of night scenes increase. For religious subjects especially, the sacred luminous light became a sign of spiritual experience and transcendence⁴. Another media-specific aspect is that beds became per se a site for the production of decorative and representative images. This realization results above all from the evaluation of inventories, which also sheds light on the material properties of beds⁵. In some cases, court chronicles allow further clarification of their different functions. As my example from the Florentine Villa Poggio Imperiale will show, however, these sources rarely allow a direct approach to nighttime activities in beds. Therefore, an analysis necessitates a

3. Katja Kwastek, *Camera. Gemalter und realer Raum der italienischen Frührenaissance*, Weimar, VDG, 2011, 222; for the material culture of beds, see the contribution in this volume by Sasha Handley.

4. Wolfgang Schöne, *Über das Licht in der Malerei*, Berlin, Gebr. Mann, 1954; Markus Zink, *Theologische Bildhermeneutik. Ein kritischer Entwurf zu Gegenwartskunst und Kirche*, Münster, LIT, 2003, 384–85.

5. Peter Thornten, *Interni del Rinascimento italiano, 1400–1600*, Milan, Leonardo, 1992, 111–67.

combined examination of pictorial representation, material tradition, and textual specification. Additional support for this approach comes from a methodological framing that incorporates both spatial and object-based theories for a historical reconstruction of the agency of beds.

Method

Most of the following material results from my studies on women's apartments at the Florentine court of the Medici⁶. The analysis was guided by an interest in the relationship between gender and space against the backdrop of spatial turn-theories and was conducted on several layers, i.e., architectural, functional, visual, and social. This method allowed for both a structural investigation of gender relations beyond biographical models and a specific historical contextualization of relevant art works and furniture. The focus on the bed was then a next step inspired by the research of Irene Nierhaus, who turned her attention from spaces to objects. For this purpose, the bed and its representation are considered as a matrix or blueprint referring to the body and its practices as well as to social and normative discourses⁷.

To further enhance our historical understanding of the bed, the currently much discussed approaches of New Materialism – by Jane Bennett, among others – have shown to be effective as

6. Ilaria Hoppe, «A Duchess' Place at Court: The Quartiere di Eleonora in the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence», in Konrad Eisenbichler (ed.), *The Cultural World of Eleonora di Toledo*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, 98–118; Ilaria Hoppe, *Die Räume der Regentin. Die Villa Poggio Imperiale zu Florenz*, Berlin, Reimer, 2012; Ilaria Hoppe, «Engendering Pietas Austriaca: The Villa Poggio Imperiale in Florence under Maria Maddalena of Austria», in Herbert Karner, Ingrid Ciulisová, Bernardo García García (eds.), *The Habsburgs and their Courts in Europe, 1400–1700: Between Cosmopolitanism and Regionalism*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, KU Leuven, 2014 (PALATIUM e-Publications, 1), <http://www.courtresidences.eu/index.php/publications/e-Publications/>.

7. Irene Nierhaus, Kathrin Heinz, *Matratze / Matrice. Möblierung von Subjekt und Gesellschaft, Konzepte in Kunst und Architektur*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2016, see, in particular, my contribution: Ilaria Hoppe, «Das Bett in der Frühen Neuzeit: Praktiken der Vergesellschaftung am Beispiel Florenz», 389–410.

well. Like the *spatial turn* before, they try to shift the anthropocentric subject-object boundaries and their inherent power structures; primarily because they do not set the focus on human activity, but on an object, in our case the bed. At the same time, however, the object is not viewed in isolation, but always in relation to other human and non-human bodies. According to Bennett's idea of 'thing-power,' these objects have an agency of their own, but always within a structure or assemblage⁸. Therefore, the bed will be observed as the principal subject within a constellation of bodies, be it in pictorial representations or textual descriptions of events, for instance at court. Although Bennett draws on other examples for her theory, what can be observed in the evolution of the bed in the early modern period is comparable to her view of how an object can develop a life of its own that «obeys an emergent, rather than a linear, causality»⁹. Accordingly, both hegemonies and the not yet so clearly distinguished social spheres can be revealed. Moreover, Bennett's concept of an 'enchanted materialism'¹⁰ – based on visibility and corporeal presence – is particularly useful for my case study since it is central to understanding early modern concepts of the bed as a nearly magical object or a sacred sphere, a medium of transcendental and transtemporal power.

The Private as a Modern Category

A modern understanding of privacy developed concurrently with the formation of historiography as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century. Both spheres were characterized by white, masculine, bourgeois norms that led to numerous exclusions¹¹. It

8. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, 23–24; Katharina Hoppe, Thomas Lemke, *Neue Materialismen zur Einführung*, Hamburg, Junius, 2021, 43.

9. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 41.

10. Hoppe, Lemke, *Neue Materialismen zur Einführung*, 52.

11. Joan W. Scott, «Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis», *American Historical Review*, 91 (5) (1986), 1953–75; Claudia Opitz, *Um-Ordnung der Geschlechter. Einführung in die Geschlechtergeschichte*, Tübingen, edition diskord, 2005, 25–28, 60–66.

was not until the second half of the twentieth century that research turned toward the everyday or private life as a relevant subject, as can be seen by the seminal publication campaigns of Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby¹². In my view, it is only this changed perspective that made it possible to fully understand the manifold functions of the early modern dwelling house, its fittings, and decoration. The use of the term 'bed,' for example, was not always tied to a piece of furniture but referred for lower social classes only to a sack filled with straw, used both on the floor or on a wooden board supported by stools, usually to be found in communal spaces like the kitchen¹³. This socialization is probably the most significant difference from everyday life in the modern era: one was never actually alone and there was no privacy, not even when sleeping. Among the upper classes and at court, the separation of the sexes had been common since antiquity, but each slept with a servant or serving woman¹⁴. When traveling, it was quite common until the eighteenth century to share a bed with strangers, often unclothed. Only gradually did the isolation and alienation of bodies occur, indicating a profound change in interpersonal relations, as explored by Norbert Elias: «And we recognize how far from self-evident it is that bed and body should form such psychological danger zones as they do in the most recent phase of civilization»¹⁵. For an historical understanding of the bed, I would like to stress, we must overcome our notion of privacy.

12. Georges Duby, Philippe Ariès, *Histoire de la vie privée*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1985-1987, 5 volumes; for this article, the German version was used: Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby, *Die Geschichte des privaten Lebens*, Frankfurt, S. Fischer, 1989-1993, 5 volumes.

13. Thornten, *Interni del Rinascimento italiano*, 111, fig. 111.

14. Leon Battista Alberti, *L'architettura. De re aedificatoria*, ed. and trans. Giovanni Orlandi, intro. and notes Paolo Porthoghesi, Milan, Edizioni Il Polifilo, 1966, 343. A survey for Europe is given by Jan Hirschbiegel, Werner Paravicini, *Das Frauenzimmer. Die Frau bei Hofe in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*. 6. Symposium der Residenzen-Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen (Dresden, 26-29 September 1998), Stuttgart, Thorbecke, 2000, and for Italy esp. in my article Hoppe, «A Duchess' Place at Court», 104-6.

15. Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, rev. ed., Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, 142.

Early Renaissance in Florence

Indeed, the bed for the upper classes was not a thing to be hidden but had become a prestigious item and grew to nearly disproportional sizes¹⁶. In Florence, the processes of change in living and sleeping habits during the early modern period can be traced particularly well. We have here a rich stock of sources as well as a dynamic development of art and architecture in the service of an initially bourgeois-mercantile upper class, which was oriented toward courtly models. In the famous frescoes by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Tornabuoni Chapel in Santa Maria Novella, for example, the *Nativity of Mary* is transposed to a fifteenth-century interior (fig. 14). The depiction, which is certainly idealized, nevertheless provides information about a living space. The woman in childbed receives her female guests there as a matter of course. Her sleeping place is elevated and surrounded by chests (*cassone*), as they had probably been common since the fourteenth century¹⁷. The back wall is part of a precious paneling with a figurative frieze and *all'antica* inlays. The bed serves to elevate St. Anne as well as to separate her from the profane space, since all the sacred actions such as cuddling and washing the holy child take place at or in front of the voluminous furniture. The scene of the visit, again, reflects a contemporary custom of the Florentine upper class in which women visited each other in childbed and brought gifts¹⁸. The bedchamber was thus not a private space in the modern sense but opened for social occasions to a partial public of female networks. The *camera* was furnished in a representative manner precisely because it was a social place; and in it, the bed was the most important object of distinction. If one could afford it, one invested in a

16. Attilio Schiaparelli, *La casa fiorentina e i suoi arredi nei secoli XIV e XV*, I, Florence, Sansoni 1908, 233; Kwastek, *Camera*, 222.

17. Giuseppe Cantelli, «L'arredo: la dimensione privata dell'abitare. Mobilia e suppelletilli nelle dimore di patrizi, contadini e borghesi», in Amerigo Restucci (ed.), *L'architettura civile in Toscana. Il Medioevo*, Cinisello Balsamo, Monte dei Paschi di Siena, 1995, 443–93, here 472–79.

18. Sharon T. Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence*, Baltimore/London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, 172.

large bed in which several people could sleep¹⁹. The Florentine statutes of the carpenters' guild regulated manufacture very precisely and demanded a luxury tax for oversize versions²⁰. It offered a space for a great variety of activities: sleeping, of course, but also working, conversing, receiving guests, playing, or praying²¹. The surrounding chests were used to store bedding and clothing as well as important documents and valuables, and this might be the reason why they were also called *forzieri*, meaning strongbox or safe. Especially in Florence they were turned into highly valuable objects with lavish and figurative decorations²². Within the mercantile upper class, they played an important role during wedding ceremonies, accompanying the bride to her new home²³. Because of their ties to weddings, they were long thought of only as a female asset, but research has shown that the most decorated and furnished rooms in the Florentine palazzi served above all the representation of the male part of the family, making them the very center of the house²⁴.

At that time, these spaces were called *camera* or *anticamera*, in contrast to the hall (i.e., *salone*), which was larger and where strangers could enter. Graduations were also made through the furnishings. Thus, there were *camere* which featured a so-called *lettuccio*, a kind of sofa or daybed. Like the room in which they were placed, they took on several functions at once, such as rest-

19. Charles-Marie Bourel de La Roncière, «Gesellschaftliche Eliten an der Schwelle zur Renaissance. Das Beispiel Toskana», in Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby (eds.), *Die Geschichte des privaten Lebens*, II: *Vom Feudalzeitalter zur Renaissance*, Frankfurt, S. Fischer, 1990, 161–298, here 183; Philippe Contamine, «Bäuerlicher Herd und päpstlicher Palast: 14. und 15. Jahrhundert», *ibid.*, 399–470, here 455–64.

20. Schiaparelli, *La casa fiorentina*, 233.

21. La Roncière, «Gesellschaftliche Eliten», 188.

22. Cristelle Baskins, *The Triumph of Marriage: Painted Cassoni of the Renaissance*, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2008.

23. Bettina Uppenkamp, «Griselda – Ein Märchen von der Zivilisierenden Macht weiblicher Demut. Die Hundertste Novelle des Decamerone in Hochzeitsbildern des Quattrocento», in Anne-Marie Bonnet, Barbara Schellewald (eds.), *Frauen in der Frühen Neuzeit. Lebensentwürfe in Kunst und Literatur*, Köln/Weimar/Wien, Böhlau, 2004, 165–88, esp. 178–88.

24. Susanne Kress, «Frauenzimmer der Florentiner Renaissance und ihre Ausstattung: Eine erste 'Spurensuche'», in Hirschbiegel, Paravicini, *Das Frauenzimmer*, 91–113.

ing, needlework, reading, or receiving guests. They could also take on a throne-like connotation. In Botticelli's detail of the Annunciation, the daybed is elevated by a pedestal and highlighted as a special place with a veil (fig. 15)²⁵. The distinction from the bedchamber behind is clear, but it stands open without a door, indicating a uniform domestic sphere that did not yet know a stringent separation of functions.

Beds, *lettucci*, and *cassone* were long thought of as furniture for private zones in a modern sense, which also led to misinterpretations of the related imagery. Indeed, it was their specific shape that set the conditions for profane painting of the early Renaissance as transverse rectangular images, for which the representation of the human body was particularly suitable. The first nudes seem to have been created for the inside lid of *cassone*²⁶, and the most famous paintings by Sandro Botticelli were decorations for *camere*. As the inventory of the Palazzo Medici shows, his *Primavera* – the icon of early Renaissance painting – hung above a *lettuccio* in the *camera terrena* of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, and others were part of wall decorations or beds. But this does not mean that their imagery was only dedicated to brides and weddings; on the contrary, it pursued highly political agendas in the service of the then ruling family²⁷.

French Courts

Another variant of the bed as a most important piece of furniture and, simultaneously, sacred sphere is known as the *lit de justice*, literally the bed of justice in French court ceremonial (fig. 16). This was a session of Parliament characterized by the presence of the king. His body was emphasized by a canopy with

25. Thornton, *Interni del Rinascimento italiano*, 147.

26. See, for example, the famous *cassone* by Giovanni di Ser Giovanni (Lo Scheggia) with the story of Hersilia in the front, c. 1460, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst.

27. For a summary of the famous discussion in art-historical scholarship, see Cristina Acidini, «Für ein blühendes Florenz. Botticellis mythologische Allegorien», in Andreas Schuhmacher (ed.), *Botticelli. Bildnis. Mythos. Andacht*, ex. cat. Städelmuseum Frankfurt/Ostfildern, 2009, 73–96.

cushions, on a fabric-covered, bed-like platform²⁸. The origin of this unusual form of meeting is attributed to various sources: One suspects a connection with the laying of decrees by the holy king Louis in front of his bedstead²⁹; panegyric texts trace it back to a divine union between the allegories of secular rule with divine law in a bed³⁰. In both cases, we see the ruler's body perceived as holy and its connection to the furniture that becomes thus – to echo Jane Bennett – an 'enchanted material' and an agent for a mythical bond. Even though the custom of using an oversized bed for this kind of ceremonial was abandoned in the sixteenth century, the name *lit de justice* remained until the end of the Ancien Régime.

The interaction between a bed and the ruler's body remained extremely important through the centuries in French ceremonial. As numerous miniatures from the famous books of hours illustrate, the reception in the *Grande Chambre*, furnished with a state bed, was already common at the Burgundian court around 1400 (fig. 17)³¹. In the illustration, the sovereign's body and the state bed behind him, which is characterized by a lavish canopy – as one would see over a throne – overlap strikingly. However, state beds at that time were apparently not used for sleeping, but primarily for acts of dynastic representation, such as weddings or the presentation of newborn princes and princesses³². They furnished smaller rooms that were located on the axis between the hall and the actual bedroom during the ever further differentiating ceremonial and were often used for audiences among a smaller circle, as shown in the illustration.

28. Elizabeth A. R. Brown, Richard C. Famiglietti, *The lit de justice: Semantics, Ceremonial, and the Parliament of Paris, 1300-1600*, Sigmaringen, Thorbecke, 1994.

29. *Ibid.*, 21.

30. *Ibid.*, 28.

31. Krista De Jonge, «Ceremonial 'Grey Areas': On the Placing and Decoration of Semi-Public and Semi-Private Spaces in Burgundian-Habsburg Court Residences in the Low Countries (1450-1550)», in Stephan Hoppe, Krista de Jonge, Stefan Breitling (eds.), *The Interior as an Embodiment of Power. The Image of the Princely Patron and its Spatial Setting (1400-1700)*, Heidelberg, arthistoricum.net, 2018, 31-55.

32. *Ibid.*, 41.

Erotic Beds

During the sixteenth century, the sleeping accommodation of the upper class solidified into an architectural enclosure connected by four fixed supports and a canopy³³. Preliminary forms of alcoves, which had hygienic and climatic uses, had been known since the Middle Ages. From this, the bed developed into a luxury item as an independent piece of furniture. Its equipment included at least three mattresses: The lowest was a sack filled with straw, on top of which came the actual mattress filled with wool or inferior feathers. In Italy, the last layer was called *coltrice*, a cover padded with high-quality feathers, whose Italian etymology covers a very wide spectrum: from its materiality as a cushion or bedding to a reference to its function during marriage and sexuality³⁴. The beds themselves became increasingly elaborate in their design. The fresco by Sodoma, in the Villa Farnesina in Rome, shows such a sumptuous four-poster bed, the elements of which are decorated with antique ornamental forms (fig. 18). This fresco is only one of many examples of bed scenes from the first half of the sixteenth century that are expressions of a rather permissive eroticism in Italy before the Catholic reform. Such depictions show the bed as a place of pleasure and not just as a frame for normative functionality or a sign of divine rulership. At the same time, the image reproduces the dominant gender discourse, in which the female body is assigned to the mattress as passive-receptive material. The prominent fresco commissioned by the powerful banker Agostino Chigi for his *camera* also shows the social permeability of bedrooms, as the scene is populated by maids, slaves, and putti. Thus, even in art, the bed was not necessarily imagined as a place of intimate togetherness. In Marc Antonio Raimondi's illustration – allegedly executed after sketches by Giulio Romano – of Pietro Aretino's *Modi*, we can even observe a voyeur (fig. 19). This pornographic work

33. Michael H. Sprenger, «Das höfische Bett. Überlegungen zu einem bedeutenden Möbel in der fürstlichen Repräsentation der Frühen Neuzeit», *Barockberichte*, 48/49 (2007), 162–75.

34. Thornten, *Interni del Rinascimento italiano*, 165.

from 1524 was censored immediately after its appearance, sending the engraver to prison and Aretino into exile³⁵. I chose this illustration because here the bed actually ‘acts’, as the mattress protrudes like a tongue, and the female body too is not passive, but takes an athletic posture. It is quite clear that the illustration as well as the bold, pornographic accompanying text were addressed to a male audience; however, from a materialistic perspective, the dichotomy between active-passive and male-female dissolves. Rather, the bodies and the furniture interact with each other.

The connection between the bed, the erotic, and the night remained tied especially to the iconography of *Cupid and Psyche*. Such erotic subjects were seen less at the beginning of the Catholic reform, but re-emerged after 1600, mainly as paintings for collectors. The story by Apuleius allowed the rendering of naked bodies and the then so successful *chiaroscuro* painting. The version by Jacopo Zucchi furthermore shows a canopy bed. Such beds later became known as *lits à la romaine* and were considered as the erotic bed par excellence, possibly used by elite prostitutes (fig. 20)³⁶. In fact, the bed occupies the entire pictorial space and additionally shows a miniature of Michelangelo’s sculpture *Night* in the background. Despite the strong appeal of the naked female allegory, the corresponding *Rime* by Michelangelo interpret sleep as a lack of pain and shame:

*Caro m’è’ l sonno, e più l’esser di sasso,
mentre che’ l danno e la vergogna dura;
non veder, non sentir m’è gran ventura;
però non mi destar, deh, parla basso*³⁷.

My sleep is dear to me, and more dear this being of stone,
as long as the agony and shame last.
Not to see, not to hear [or feel] is for me the best fortune.
So do not wake me! Speak softly³⁸.

35. James G. Turner, *Marcantonio Raimondi’s Lost Modi and their Copies*, «Print Quarterly», 21/4 (2004), 363–84.

36. Thornton, *Interni del Rinascimento italiano*, 156.

37. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rime*, con la introduzione di G. Testori e a cura di E. Barelli, Milano, Fabbri, 2001, 261.

38. Kenneth Gross, *Dream of the Moving Statue*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, 94.

The last denotation perfectly suits the story of the ancient lovers, as Psyche was forbidden to wake up Cupid. Unable to resist, she had to endure many difficulties before she could embrace her loved one again and give birth to a daughter called Voluptas, the goddess of sensual pleasures³⁹.

The Catholic Bed

At the same time, we see the development of increasingly complex spatial structures in princely residences, culminating in Versailles in the mid-seventeenth century. In the sense of Jürgen Habermas's historic notion of representation, the dominant concept of power was based on the idea of a divine right by God's grace embodied by the ruler⁴⁰. The legitimation of such power therefore sought to highlight and demarcate these bodies from their surrounding – and as we have seen – omnipresent society through ceremonial, architecture, and furniture like the famous state beds used for the *Lever et Coucher* of the French rulers. The often comical scenes in cloak-and-dagger movies portraying this custom tell us a lot about the aforementioned modern estrangement from the proximity of beds and bodies in the centuries before. On the other hand, it was long assumed that the Spanish court ceremonial of the Habsburgs did not know this use. However, the research of Magdalena Sánchez and my case study on the Villa Poggio Imperiale in Florence have provided evidence to the contrary⁴¹.

The latter had been lavishly modernized and furnished as a residence by order of Archduchess Maria Magdalena of Austria during her regency at the beginning of the seventeenth century. For the purposes of this study, the function and decoration of her bedchamber is of particular interest. The chronicle kept by

39. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 6,24 sgg.

40. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, transl. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Politi, 1989.

41. Magdalena S. Sánchez, *The Empress, the Queen, and the Nun. Women and Power at the Court of Philip III of Spain*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998; Hoppe, «Das Bett in der Frühen Neuzeit», 402-6.

Cesare Tinghi of the Florentine court of that period, plus the inventory of the villa from 1625, make it possible to reconstruct the relative functions⁴². It turned out that the regent did receive visitors in her state bed, but only when she was ill – and this seems to be the decisive difference from the French court. For example, the chronicle describes in detail a bloodletting. Afterwards the archduchess remained in bed and her children came to visit her there, as did her guest at that time, the Duke of Mantua. On this occasion, the co-regent Grand Duchess Christina of Lorraine presented her with a valuable gift, a black and gold lacquered cabinet. After lunch, which she probably also consumed in bed, the court musician Francesca Caccini came and played music together with the princes and princesses⁴³.

Magdalena Sánchez's research on the Spanish court under Queen Margaret of Austria, a sister of the Florentine regent, has shown how illness was used quite deliberately as a strategy to avoid ceremonial duties or to attract the attention of the ruler⁴⁴. Sickness was thus not concealed at the court of Catholic queens, but on the contrary exposed and instrumentalized. Accordingly, the fresco program in the regent's bedchamber in Florence thematized the suffering of Christian virgin martyrs (fig. 21). The model for this decoration originates from a publication dedicated to her, in which the *vite* are presented as *vigilie*, i.e., as sacred readings for the night⁴⁵. In the case of a female regency, the absence of a male authority put the reign in crisis. This becomes particularly evident in a bedchamber, with its strong reference to dynastic succession. In Poggio Imperiale, the selected

42. Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Miscellanea Medicea 11; Guardaroba Mediceo 479.

43. Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Miscellanea Medicea 11, ff. 41v–42r.

44. Sánchez, *The Empress, the Queen, and the Nun*, 156–71.

45. Niccolò Lorini del Monte, *Elogii delle piv principali S. donne del sacro calendario, e martirologio romano, vergini, martiri, et altre. Messi insieme con molte vigilie. Dal M.R.P.M. e Predicatore Generale F. Niccolò Lorini del Monte; dell'Ordine de' Predicatori, Patrizio Fiorentino, e Predicatore del Seriss. G. DVCA di Toscana D. COSIMO II. Dedicati alla Serenissima Arciduchessa Maria Magdalena d'Austria, Gran Duchessa, e Consorte del predetto Signore. A' quali si è aggiunto vn Raggionamento in lode de' Santi Martiri di Mugello, S. Cresci, e Compagni*, Florence, 1617.

virgin martyrs were able to fill this void, since they offered themselves as desexualized models of sanctity and femininity for the regent-dowager, who in turn was to be worshipped lying in her bed like the latter. The illustration of the life and death of Margaret of Austria, Queen of Spain, accompanying the lavish *exequies* in Florence from 1612, exactly depicts the concept of a female Catholic ruler lying in bed like a saint, as well as the typical design of a state bed as mentioned in the inventory of Poggio Imperiale (fig. 22).

Unfortunately, the bed itself has not been preserved. The inventory describes it as a richly decorated canopy bed, as we already know it from the *cinquecento*⁴⁶. In addition to the usual mattresses and blankets, it had a *carriuola*, a movable bedstead for a servant that could disappear under the four-poster. On the other hand, a kneeler, and an ebony cabinet, probably a gift from Christina of Lorraine, could be clearly identified and retraced in the Florentine collections⁴⁷. In addition, the inventory mentions numerous paintings with religious subjects. A special feature of the villa's collection were the many depictions of Saint Mary Magdalene, which refer to the regent's self-image as a holy princess. She even had herself portrayed by Justus Sustermans in a night scene as a penitent Saint Mary Magdalene⁴⁸. Thus this theme found its way into her bedchamber in a large rectangular painting that shows the ecstasy of the saint (fig. 23)⁴⁹. The motif of the reclining body is connected to a transcendent experience between life and death in a suggestive night scene. While devotional paintings had long been common in bedchambers, this tradition was clearly reinforced in Poggio Imperiale. The entire room was designed as a sanctuary, and the bed, as usual, formed the center of the action, turning itself into a 'reliquary' for the princely body⁵⁰. As in other countries of the *old regime* and unlike in France, the bed was not part of the state ceremonial

46. Guardaroba Mediceo 479, c. 4v-5v; Hoppe, *Die Räume der Regentin*, 293.

47. Annamaria Giusti, *Opificio delle Pietre Dure di Firenze. Guida al Museo*, Venice, Marsilio, 1995, 40 sg.

48. Hoppe, *Die Räume der Regentin*, 67.

49. *Ibid.*, 60; A. E. Sanger, *Art, Gender, and Religious Devotion in Grand Ducal Tuscany*, Farnham, Ashgate, 124.

50. Sprenger, *Das höfische Bett*, 168.

but of an everyday ritual, as is also evident from the court chronicle by Cesare Tinghi. Nevertheless, the similarity to the throne remained; like the throne, the bed referred to the body of the prince or princess, even if they were absent⁵¹. In this sense, the furnishings and use of the bedchamber in Poggio Imperiale could assume a legitimizing function. The regent in bed, however, no longer embodied the role of a wife or mother, but rather a martyr-like saint who sacrificed herself for the public good, i.e., her dynasty and thus the symbolic order.

Closing Remarks

As the analysis of pictorial and written sources has shown, the bed in the early modern period acted as a medium of social distinction. Therefore, it was particularly large and ostentatious, serving not only as a venue for sleep or sexual intercourse but also as a space for communication and representation. In European courtly society, it symbolized proximity to the ruling body and thus to power itself. Therefore, it could assume throne-like connotations as well as qualities of a sacred sphere. It further follows that it could not be private at all in a modern sense, but on the contrary was exhibited publicly. The bed became an agent for both male potency and female fertility and sexuality; it referred to dynastic succession and embodied the divine grace. In this sense, the bed can be compared to a contact relic, which could thus become a place of salvation: in religious representations as well as in courtly ceremonial. The pictorial sources in particular strongly emphasize the connection between body and furniture and therefore, in my opinion, redeem the notion of 'enchanted materialism,' according to Bennett.

This assembly can also be observed in a final example. The ravishing sculpture of the living saint Ludovica Albertoni by Bernini in San Francesco a Ripa in Rome shows again that the bed was most definitely not something to be hidden but a sacred

51. *Ibid.*, 170 sg.

object suitable for a chapel (fig. 24)⁵². The sumptuous drapery of the curtain at the front, the wafer-thin folded sheets, and the saint's garment form a close bond for her body, emphasizing the dramaturgy of her ecstasy. Characteristically, her physiological processes and perceptions seem to be completely suspended and transferred into a death-like state. Such conditions either occurred spontaneously or were brought about by a purposeful routine, such as asceticism, prayer, or self-harm; and these rituals were preferably performed at night. To express such a rarefied state of mind, artists during the seventeenth century developed an iconography that relied on the tender relationship between the blessed and the divine. Here, the posture of the saint reflects complete mystical devotion to the heavenly beloved. Only through the visual association with the overwhelming feeling of erotic pleasure does the exceptional situation of ecstasy become comprehensible for the average viewer, who has no experience of it⁵³. Undoubtedly, it is beyond imagination that such a display, where sensual pleasure seems to merge into a holy vision, would be executed in a contemporary Catholic church. But it is again a telling example of the agency of beds in the early modern period as a space for public occasions and communication, luxury and refinement, eroticism and sexuality, healing and transcendence. Commissioned by Pope Clement X's adopted nephew Cardinal Albertoni-Altieri, the sculpture clearly shows that, for the upper social classes of that time, the bed belonged to the "bright side of the night".

52. Shelly Karen Perlove, *Bernini and the Idealization of Death: The Blessed Ludovica Albertoni and the Altieri Chapel*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990; Gudrun Inboden, *Vorhangfall und poetische Ekstase: Gian Lorenzo Berninis Cappella Paluzzi-Albertoni, Rom, San Francesco a Ripa*, Berlin/München, Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2021.

53. Ulrich Pfisterer, «Divine Rapture: Iconography of Religious Ecstasy», in U. Gross et al. (eds.), *Ecstasy in Art, Music, and Dance*, ex. cat., Kunstmuseum Stuttgart/Zentrum Paul Klee Bern, München/London/New York, Prestel, 2018, 69–71.

ABSTRACT

Ilaria Hoppe, *The Agency of Beds: Early Modern Visions of a 'Bright' Furniture*

During the early modern period beds became luxury items with important representative functions for the upper social classes in Europe. This is due to a completely different relationship between public and private than we are familiar with, and the bed is a key example to highlight this alternative practice. Drawing on different sources, like pictorial representations, inventories, and court chronicles the article thus shows a today mostly private item as a polyvalent sphere serving a variety of functions like resting and healing, sensual pleasure, or as a place for receiving guests, moreover as a sacred sphere allowing visions and ecstasies. The bed became a central piece for social distinction and dynastic representation, as an object with which magical and spiritual ideas were associated. This kind of perception led me to think of the bed as an entity with its own agency. Therefore, I also used a neo-materialist approach to emphasize the extraordinary importance of it for the pre-modern society, for which it belonged definitively to the «bright side of the night».

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Fig. 14. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of Mary* (1485), Florence, S. Maria Novella, Tornabuoni Chapel.



Fig. 15. Sandro Botticelli, *Annunciation*, detail (c.1490). New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 16. Jean Fouquet, *Le Lit de justice de Vendôme* (c.1460). Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Gall. 6, f. 2.



Fig. 17. Jan Tarvenier, *Jean Miélot presents his treatise to Philipp the Good* (after 1457). Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België, Ms. 9092, f. 1r.



Fig. 18. Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, called Sodoma, *Alexander and Roxane*, detail (1511/12). Rome, Villa Farnesina.



Fig. 19. Anonymous, reversed copy of Position 2 or 11, numbered II, Toscanini volume, after Marcantonio Raimondi, *Modi* (1524). Vienna, Albertina.

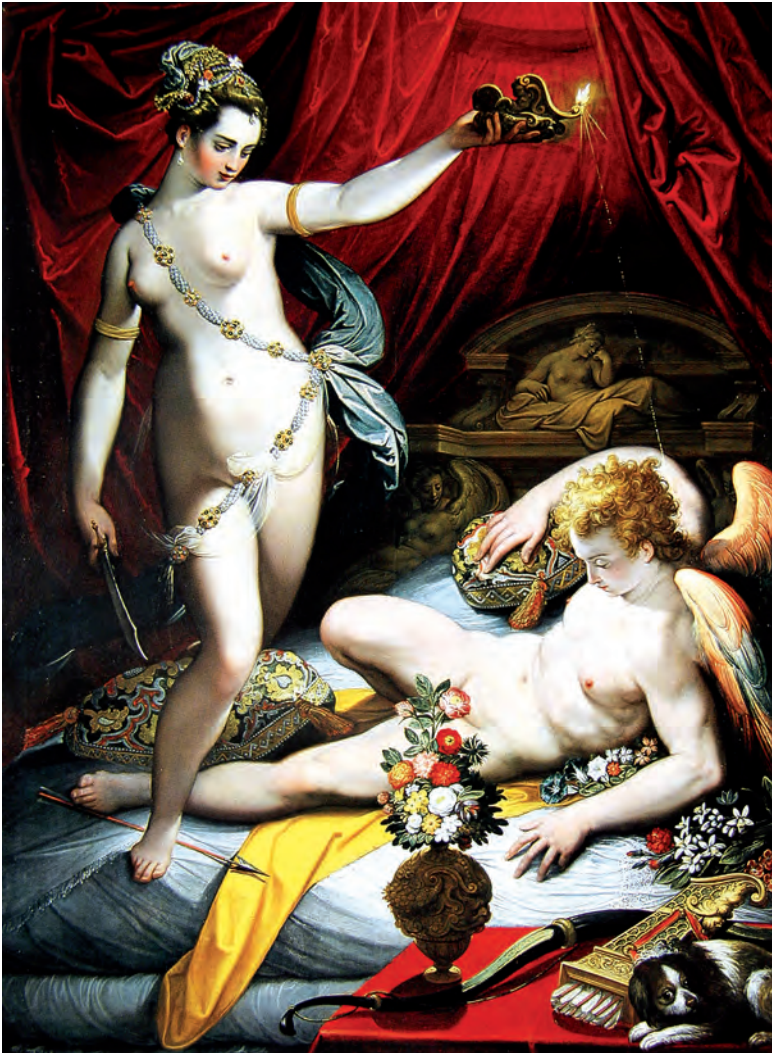


Fig. 20. Jacopo Zucchi, *Cupid and Psyche* (1589). Rome, Galleria Borghese.



Fig. 21. Anastasio Fontebuoni, *S. Agatha* (1624), Florence, Villa Poggio Imperiale.



Fig. 22. Jacques Callot, *The Death of Queen Margaret of Austria, Queen of Spain* (1612).



Fig. 23. Francesco Rustici, *St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* (1624/25). Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

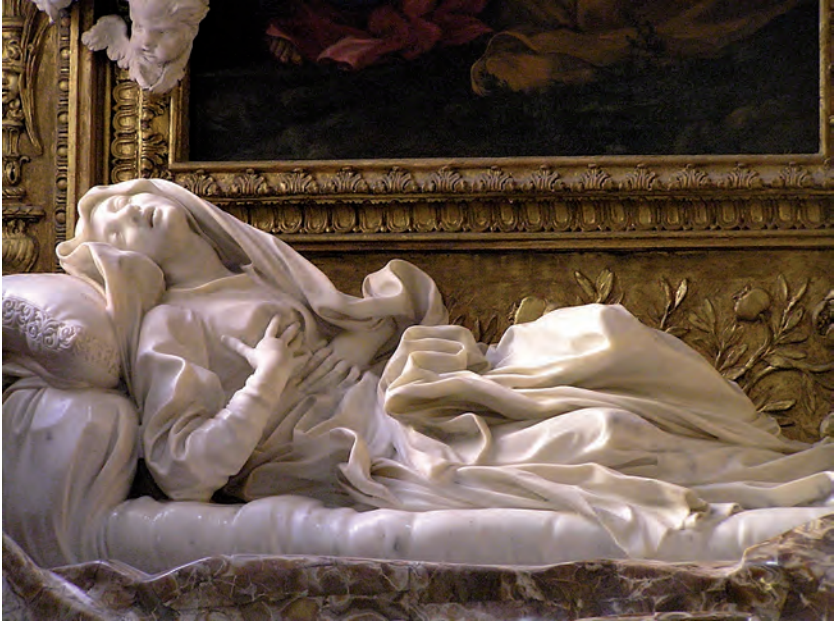


Fig. 24. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Blessed Ludovica* (1671/74). Rome, S. Francesco a Ripa.