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1 Michelangelo, *The battle of the Centaurs*. Florence, Casa Buonarroti

ANGELO POLIZIANO AND MICHELANGELO'S *BATTLE OF THE CENTAURS*

Charles Dempsey

I.

The question of the subject of Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs* (Fig. 1) remains to this day confused and is perhaps best characterized by its very undecidability. However, as we shall see, the essential classical and medieval texts upon which the invention of the relief depends had all been securely identified by Germanic scholars writing at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: that is, by Josef Strzygowski (with assistance from Carl Robert) in 1891, followed by Carl Justi in 1909. Indeed, Francesco Bocchi, in his *Bellezze della città di Fiorenza*, published in 1591, found the subject of Michelangelo's relief transparently clear. As he wrote, "The *Storia*, with so many figures in such a small place, is not confused, but so clear that whosoever has not read in books the fable as shown here, assisted by this viewing can easily comprehend fully the meaning of the whole."[1]

The fable to which Bocchi refers is pretty clearly Ovid's tale of the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs at the wedding banquet of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia. Bocchi accordingly describes the female figure being dragged away as the abducted bride, "La sposa, che è rapita", who strains to free herself from "one whose hands are entangled in her hair, and in pulling herself back with all her strength, pushes with her hands against his arm".[2] This is a remarkably sensitive reading of Michelangelo's imagery that not

[1] "Non è confusa nel picciol luogo la Storia di tante figure, ma così chiara, che chi ne' libri non ha letta sì fatta favola, aiutato da questa vista con agevolezza puote comprendere à pieno la notizia del tutto" (Francesco Bocchi, *Le Bellezze della città di Fiorenza [. . .]*, Florence 1591, p. 168). Except where indicated, translations from medieval or early modern texts are by the author. Translations from classical texts follow those in the Loeb Library editions with minor revisions.

[2] "La sposa, che è rapita, la persona di cui tutta intera si conosce, è bellissima oltra ogni stima: & lo sforzo, che fa per non andar prigioniera, è fatto con felice industria: ella mentre che cerca di levarsi dinanzi à chi le ha le mani avvolte ne' suoi capelli, mette ogni sua forza, & nel tirarsi in dietro, ponta con le mani contra le braccia di chi usa violenza, con la più bella grazia, che divisar si possa da senno humano" (*ibidem*, pp. 167f.).

only describes the action of the woman at the center of his relief, but also points to her Ovidian source: "raptaturque comis per vim nova nupta prehensis" (*Metamorphoses*, XII, 223: "The new bride is seized by the hair and violently carried away"). However, in Ovid's account, the one seizing Hippodamia by the hair is the Centaur Eurytus (Eurytion in Greek tellings of the myth), the wildest of the wild Centaurs ("saevorum saevissime Centaurorum", XII, 219), and in Michelangelo's sculpture the figure attempting to abduct the *sposa* seems clearly human, that is, a Lapith. But this is only the first of many interpretive problems posed by the *Battle of the Centaurs*, to which we will now turn, aided by Margrit Lisner's exemplary study in the Florentine *Mitteilungen* for 1980.[3]

2.

Today, the prevailing hypothesis regarding Michelangelo's relief, for want of a better, maintains that he probably did indeed take as his subject the familiar story of the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs at the banquet celebrating the nuptials of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia, recited at very great length by Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, XII, 210–576).[4] Nevertheless, indecision persists, in spite of the fact that Michelangelo's sculpture poses problems of far more than ordinary artistic and interpretive interest. For we know from no fewer than three witnesses, all contemporary with Michelangelo and each of whom knew him, that the subject was proposed to the adolescent sculptor by the great humanist philologist and poet Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494), who, in Condivi's words, explained the fable to him in minute detail ("dichiarandogli a parte per parte tutta la favola").[5] This suggests that the problem of interpreting Michelangelo's relief is inherently philological in nature; and that the real question posed by it is to determine what it is about the representation of what seems to be no more than an exceptionally violent drunken brawl that would have required detailed explanation from a humanist of the stature of Poliziano, who was, it hardly needs be added, also a poet in the vernacular tongue as well as in Latin and Greek. And it also raises the question of what Poliziano, then at the height of his powers and the most famous classical scholar in Europe, communicated to the fifteen-year-old Michelangelo, himself no doubt also a genius, but at the time an adolescent boy as yet unproven as a sculptor.

The earliest mention of the subject of the *Battle of the Centaurs* appears in Ascanio Condivi's *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti*, published in 1553 and narrated to him by the master himself. There it is stated that Michelangelo entered into the household of Lorenzo

[3] Margrit Lisner has written the most extensive, and indispensable, modern study of Michelangelo's relief, "Form und Sinngehalt von Michelangelos Kentaurenschlacht mit Notizien zu Bertoldo di Giovanni", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XXIV (1980), pp. 299–344. In the end, after a thorough exposition of the ancient fables testifying to which heroes (Theseus or Hercules?) took part in a mêlée pitting the pre-Hellenic Lapiths against the primitive Centaurs – myths confused and contradictory in their details –, further complemeted by a survey of Tre- and Quattrocento images of Hercules, Lisner tended toward a reading of Michelangelo's sculpture as a political allegory of Florentine liberty victorious over tyranny, perhaps with special reference to the young artist's early protector, Lorenzo the Magnificent.

[4] Michael Hirst, in: *Il Giardino di San Marco: maestri e compagni del giovane Michelangelo*, exh. cat. Florence 1992, ed. by Paola Barocchi, Cinisello Balsamo 1992, pp. 52–61, no. 12, maintained that the subject of the relief has given rise to much discussion, recapitulated by Paola Barocchi, who, in his opinion, rightly concluded that Michelangelo did not represent a traditional scene, referable to a precise source, but created instead an arbitrary myth. Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt was on firmer ground, however, in claiming that the subject derives from Hyginus and Ovid, and that Poliziano guided Michelangelo in the lecture of these texts (Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, "I primordi di Michelangelo scultore", in: *Giovinezza di Michelangelo*, exh. cat. Florence 2000, ed. by *eadem et al.*, Florence/Milan 1999, pp. 69–103: 76f., and the entry on the relief in the same catalogue, pp. 188–199, no. 5, p. 188). Also of value, though not germane to our present inquiry, is Andreas Thielemann, "Schlachten erschauen – Kentauren gebären: Zu Michelangelos Relief der Kentaurenschlacht", in *Michelangelo: Neue Beiträge*, conference proceedings Cologne 1996, ed. by Michael Rohlmann/Andreas Thielemann, Munich *et al.* 2000, pp. 17–92 (discussing Centaurs as *Nubigenae*, i.e., born from the union of Ixion and Nephele, or Nebula in Latin, "a cloud"). See also Sergio Risaliti/Francesco Vossilla, *Michelangelo: La Zuffa dei Centauri*, Milan 2008.

[5] Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti*, ed. by Giovanni Nencioni, Florence 1988, p. 13.

de' Medici at the age of fifteen (therefore, in 1490) and remained there for about two years, until Lorenzo's death on 8 April 1492.[6] He was encouraged in his studies by the many talented intellects who frequented that house, and "above all by the Magnificent himself, who would send for him many times a day, showing him his jewels, carnelians, medals, and similar things of great value, knowing that he had great intelligence and judgment".[7] And, Condivi adds:

> There was in the same house Poliziano, a man, as everyone knows and as his writings fully testify, of the greatest learning and acuity. He, recognizing Michelangelo's exalted spirit, greatly loved him and continually spurred him on in his studies, though there was no need, always explaining things to him and giving him something to do; among which, he proposed to him one day the Rape of Deianira and the Brawl of the Centaurs [il Ratto di Deianira e la Zuffa de' Centauri] explaining the whole of the fable to him word for word.[8]

But what is this myth that tells of a rape of Deianira and brawling Centaurs? The next mention of the sculpture was written a decade later by Benedetto Varchi in his eulogy for Michelangelo's funeral in 1564. And Varchi also identifies the subject as the "brawl of the Centaurs, when they, heated by wine no less than by the passions of love, at the height of the banqueting forcibly carried off Deianira, weeping and crying out for help in vain". Here, like Francesco Bocchi after him, Varchi betrays his reading of Ovid, who also describes the savage Centaur Eurytus inflamed by drink as well as by lust (*Metamorphoses*, XII, 220f.: "Euryte, quam vino pectus, tam virgine visa / ardet, et ebrietas geminata libidine regnat"). However, Ovid names Hippodamia as the object of Eurytus's lust, and makes no mention of Deianira, much less of her rape by a Centaur. It is therefore significant that Varchi also states that "the *materia* was given and explained to him by Messer Agnolo from Monte Pulciano [Poliziano], a man of the greatest literary culture, as much in Greek as in Latin and Tuscan".[9] Like Condivi, Varchi knew Michelangelo well, and moreover Condivi's report, which Varchi had certainly read and usefully augmented, had also been read and was undoubtedly approved by the master himself. Michelangelo did indeed voice an objection to Condivi's very next sentence, in which the biographer claimed that the relief succeeded so well that Michelangelo regretted not having taken up sculpture earlier.[10] It is therefore telling that Michelangelo tacitly accepted and certainly did not challenge Condivi's naming, in the

[6] "Era Michelagnolo, quando andò in casa del Magnifico, d'età d'anni quindici in sedici, e vi stette fin alla morte di lui, che fu nel novantadue, intorno a due anni. […] In questo mezzo attendeva Michelagnolo alli suoi studi, ogni dì mostrando qualche frutto delle sue fatiche al Magnifico" (*ibidem*). And see Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame,* 1475–1534, New Haven, Conn./London 2011, p. 17.

[7] "Dai quali tutti Michelagnolo molto era accarezzato e acceso all'onorato suo studio, ma sopra tutti dal Magnifico, il quale spesse volte il giorno lo faceva chiamare, mostrandogli sue gioie, corniole, medaglie, e cose simiglianti di molto pregio, come quel che lo conosceva d'ingegno e di iudicio" (Condivi [note 5], pp. 12f.). Condivi is of course referring to Lorenzo's celebrated collection of ancient medals, gems, and carnelians, all of which provided important models for the precocious and for the most part unprecedented classicism of Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs*.

[8] "Era nella medesima casa il Poliziano, omo, come ognun sa e piena testimonanza ne fanno i suoi scritti, dottissimo e acutissimo. Costui, conoscendo Michelagnolo di spirito elevatissimo, molto lo amava e di continuo lo spronava, ben che non bisogniasse, allo studio, dichiarandogli sempre e dandogli da far qualche cosa; tra le quali un giorno gli propose il Ratto di Deianira e la Zuffa de' Centauri, dichiarandogli a parte per parte tutta la favola" (*ibidem*, p. 13). The very first mention of the sculpture, incidentally, in a letter of 7 March 1527 written by Giovanni Borromeo to Marchese Federico Gonzaga in Mantua, refers only to a certain "quadro di figure nude che combatteno, di marmore, quale havea principiato ad instantia d'un gran signore ma non è finito". See Hirst (note 6), p. 353.

[9] Benedetto Varchi, *Orazione funerale […] fatta […] nell'essequie di Michelagnolo Buonarroti […]*, Florence 1564, p. 23: "Le prime figure, che lavorasse di marmo questo Angioletto […], fu la zuffa de' Centauri, quando eglino non meno riscaldati dal vino, che caldi d'amore rapirono d'in sul piu bello del convito forzatamente Deianíra piangente, e gridante soccorso in vano. La qual materia gli fu data, e dichiarata da M. Agnolo da Monte Pulciano, huomo di grandissima letteratura cosi Greca, come Latina, e Toscana."

[10] The aged sculptor growled in reply, as recorded in a *postilla* to Condivi written, as Caroline Elam has shown, by his assistant Tiberio Calcagni,

same passage, the subject of his youthful sculpture as the *Rape of Deianira and the brawl of the Centaurs*.

Afterwards, no further mention is made of a *Rape of Deianira* in sources contemporary with Michelangelo, the last of which was written by Vasari, who also knew him well. Vasari does not cite the Centaur relief in the 1550 edition of the *Vite*, which suggests he did not yet know it. But in the 1568 edition he writes (in the meantime having read Condivi's *Vita*) that, "counseled by Poliziano, a man singular in letters, Michelangelo made in a marble given him by that Lord [Lorenzo de' Medici] the Battle of Hercules with the Centaurs".[11] This is the first we have heard of Hercules, and at the very same moment that Deianira disappears from the sources, and this has been the cause of the deepest confusion. It has been taken to mean that Vasari, by adducing Hercules battling with the Centaurs, is fundamentally in conflict with Condivi and Varchi, who cite an all-but-unknown myth combining the rape of Deianira with brawling Centaurs. Accordingly, their witness, hastily dismissed by Tolnay as the basis for what he calls a "double tradition passed down by the early interpreters" (i.e., Condivi and Varchi's *Rape of Deianira and the brawl of the Centaurs* on the one hand, and on the other Vasari's *Battle of Hercules with the Centaurs*), has been discounted.[12] It has often been claimed, following a suggestion made by Franz Wickhoff as long ago as 1882, that Condivi (or Michelangelo? or even Poliziano!) simply confused Deianira with Deidamia, the name Plutarch in his *Life of Theseus* gave to Hippodamia, bride of Pirithoüs, when telling the familiar story of their wedding banquet and the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs, a tale most famously told by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*.[13]

In fact, the hero of the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs as narrated by Plutarch and especially Ovid, is Theseus, not Hercules. This is also true of Homer's allusions to the myth, attesting to its very great antiquity, in the *Iliad* (I, 262–268): "Such warriors have I never since seen, nor shall see, as Pirithoüs was [...] and Theseus, peer of the immortals [...]. Mightiest were they, and with the mightiest did they fight, even with the Centaurs who lived in the mountains, and terribly did they destroy them"; and again in the *Odyssey* (XXI, 295–297): "It was wine that made foolish even the Centaur, glorious Eurytion, in the

that "on the contrary he [Michelangelo] says his art is sculpture, though he works and has worked in others in order to please his princely patrons"; adding that, "as for the *storia*, when he saw it [again] he knew that the labors of this art are extremely light for one enamored of it" (Condivi [note 5], p. XXI, *postilla* no. I: "Anzi dice che l'arte sua è la scultura; l'altre fa et à fatte per compiacere ai prìncipi. Della storia, che quando la vedeva, conoscieva le fatiche della arte a chi se ne inamora esser legieris[si]me"). For the authorship, see Caroline Elam, "'Che utima mano?' Tiberio Calcagni's *postille* to Condivi's Life of Michelangelo", *ibidem*, pp. XXIII–XLVI.

[11] "[...] in questo tempo, consigliato dal Poliziano, uomo nelle lettere singulare, Michelagnolo fece in un pezzo di marmo datogli da quel Signore la Battaglia di Ercole coi Centauri, che fu tanto bella che talvolta, per chi ora la considera, non par di mano di giovane, ma di maestro pregiato e consumato negli studii e pratico in quell'arte" (Giorgio Vasari, *La vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Paola Barocchi, Milan/Naples 1962, I, p. 11). Vasari is followed in this judgment by Raffaello Borghini in his *Il Riposo* of 1584, p. 511, who writes: "sculpì in un pezzo di marmo la battaglia di Ercole co' Centauri opera maravigliosa, non di giovane, com'egli era; ma da uomo consumatissimo nell'arte." All this is well summarized by Lisner, who ends her survey of the sixteenth-century sources with Francesco Bocchi's brilliant account in the *Bellezze della città di Fiorenza* of 1591 (in which, however, Michelangelo's subject is identified only as "una battaglia de' Centauri"; Bocchi [note 1], p. 167).

[12] Charles de Tolnay, *The Youth of Michelangelo*, Princeton 1943, pp. 133–136 (with earlier bibliography).

[13] Franz Wickhoff, "Die Antike im Bildungsgange Michelangelos", in: *Mitteilungen des Institutes für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, III (1882), pp. 408–435, esp. pp. 418f. Wickhoff's idea that "Deianira" was a mistake for "Deidamia" was quickly picked up by others. See, for example, with a summary of the discussion up to that point, Henry Thode, *Michelangelo: Kritische Untersuchungen über seine Werke*, Berlin 1908, I, pp. 8–10. Plutarch's account reads as follows: "After this Pirithoüs married Deidamia, and invited Theseus to the wedding, entreating him to come and see his country, and make acquaintance with the Lapithae; he had at the same time invited the Centaurs to the feast, who growing hot with wine and beginning to be insolent and wild, and offering violence to the women, the Lapithae took immediate revenge upon them, slaying many of them upon the place, and afterwards, having overcome them in battle, drove the whole race of them out of their country, Theseus all along taking their part and fighting on their side" (Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. by John Dryden, ed. and revis. by Arthur Hugh Clough, New York 1992, I, p. 20).

palace of great-hearted Pirithoüs when he visited the Lapiths." Hercules on the other hand, who is indeed well known to be an implacable foe of the Centaurs (notorious in their turn for drunkenness, lechery, and brawling), is the hero named by Vasari as the protagonist of Michelangelo's relief. We must, therefore, be cautious in considering Ovid's account of the wedding of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia as being the only source for the fable proposed and patiently explained to the adolescent Michelangelo by Poliziano. Moreover, with all due respect to Wickhoff, his proposal that Condivi, Michelangelo, or even Poliziano himself had mistaken Plutarch's Deidamia for Deianira, though ingenious, is unfounded. It is a hypothesis that seriously underestimates the quality of Poliziano's scholarship, not to mention his standing as the most sophisticated of Quattrocento practitioners of the new humanist philology. And it is a hypothesis that would be easily overthrown by the discovery of even one instance, however obscure, of an ancient myth combining a rape of Deianira with a battle of Hercules and the Centaurs. And indeed, for only nine years did Nemesis patiently bide her time before striking in 1891, when Josef Strzygowski published exactly this myth.[14]

For it was Strzygowski who identified an obscure fable of Hercules, which he found narrated by Hyginus in the *Fabulae*, the original text of which, along with later derivations, will be quoted in the pages below. The myth appears as a side story to one of the Labors of Hercules, usually the pursuit of the Erymanthean boar. While on his quest, Hercules stopped at the Achaean city of Olenus, where he enjoyed the hospitality of its king, one Dexamenus. While there, Hercules seduced the king's daughter, Deianira, promising to return and make her his wife. After his departure the Centaur Eurytion, son of Ixion and Nephele (or Nubis, from the Latin word for cloud), demanded Deianira for himself, intimidating Dexamenus who, fearing the irascible Centaur's great strength, promised her to him instead. By chance, on the very day appointed for the wedding Hercules returned. A fierce mêlée ensued, during which Hercules killed Eurytion together with many other Centaurs who had come as guests to the wedding celebration, carrying away Deianira as his own rightful bride. The myth reconciles Condivi and Varchi's testimony that Michelangelo's subject was "il Ratto di Deianira e la Zuffa de' Centauri" with Vasari's claim that it was "la Battaglia di Ercole coi Centauri". And its very unfamiliarity helps explain why the fifteen-year-old Michelangelo needed to receive learned guidance from Poliziano. However, before considering Strzygowski's discovery further, we must first turn to the question of how Poliziano knew the story.

3.

The much better-known myth of the marriage of Hercules and Deianira (in which she is named the daughter of King Oeneus of Calydon) makes no mention of the Centaur Eurytion, nor of a Centauromachia. Instead, it tells of Hercules's fight with the river god Acheloüs, who had assumed the form of a bull and was defeated by Hercules, who tore off one of Acheloüs's horns, thus winning Deianira for himself (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 8–88). Moreover, the better-known story of the rape of Deianira narrates an incident occurring long after her marriage to Hercules, at the very end of the hero's life. It concerns another Centaur, Nessus, who attempted to abduct Deianira when transporting her on his back across a flood-swollen stream and was killed by an arrow shot from the shore by Hercules (a subject well known to Quattrocento artists, among them the Pollaiuolo brothers,[15] and one often treated in painting, most famously so by Guido Reni). Hercules himself died

[14] Josef Strzygowski, "Studien zu Michelangelo's Jugendentwickelung", in: *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preußischen Kunstsammlungen*, XII (1891), pp. 207–219, esp. p. 209.

[15] For their depiction of the myth, see Alison Wright, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers: The Arts of Florence and Rome*, New Haven, Conn./London 2005, pp. 98–102, 525.

very soon after, when Deianira unwittingly gave him Nessus's cloak, envenomed with the Centaur's blood (*Metamorphoses*, IX, 107–158).

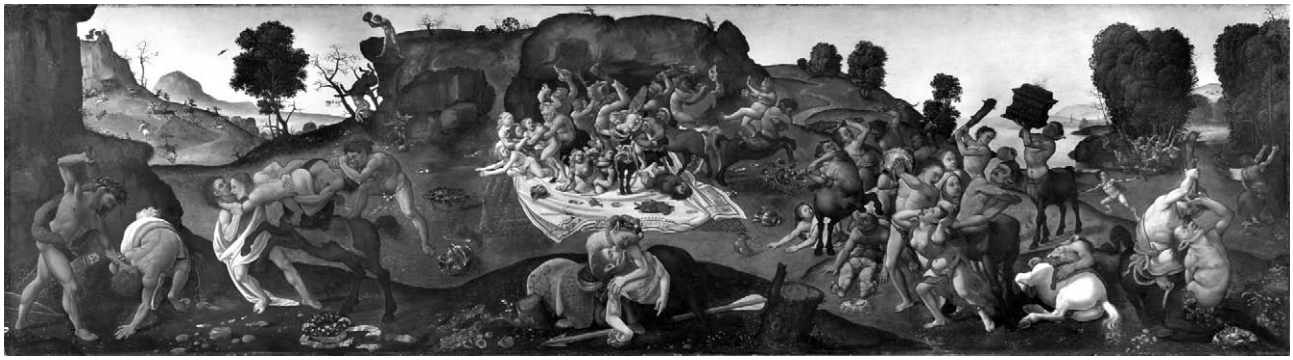
In fact, the myth of Hercules, taken together with that of Theseus (with which it frequently overlaps and is confused) is one of the most complex to have survived from antiquity, varying as the cult of the heroes spread from place to place, with the inevitable introduction of disparate incidents derived from the local mythologies of one territory or another. There are essentially three principal local versions of Hercules and a Centauromachia.

The first and best known, of course, is the one sung by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*. It is a Thessalian myth, in which Hercules vestigially appears at the very end, when Tlepolemus reproaches the narrator, Nestor, for not mentioning him. As we have seen, it tells the story of the Lapiths and Centaurs at the wedding banquet celebrating the nuptials of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia, when one Centaur, Eurytion (Latinized as Eurytus by Ovid), inflamed by the twin fires of lust and the wine, attempted to carry off the bride and thus provoked the mêlée. However, as we have also seen, Theseus is the hero of this story, not Hercules, and it is Theseus who kills Eurytus. This fable is the subject of two Florentine *spalliera* panels by Bartolomeo di Giovanni, last known in an English collection, illustrated by Margrit Lisner, and datable roughly contemporaneously to Michelangelo's relief.[16] One panel shows the seating of guests at the wedding banquet, and the other the subsequent brawl between the Lapiths and Centaurs. The mêlée at the nuptial feast of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia is also the subject of a famous painting by Piero di Cosimo in the National Gallery in London (Fig. 2), which is astonishingly literal in its adherence to the more gruesome details of Ovid's telling of the story in the *Metamorphoses*.[17] In it, Piero sedulously followed Ovid's account, so much so that almost all of the minor figures named and episodes described by Ovid are easily identified in his painting. Nor did Piero shy away from the brutality of the battle described by Ovid in excruciating, near-sadistic detail. The combatants attack one another tooth and nail, crushing bone and cartilage with branches torn from trees, with clubs and burning brands, and even using a chandelier, a stone altar, and a highly ornamented silver pitcher – all of which are especially conspicuous among the weapons described by Ovid and meticulously painted by Piero. Prominently illustrated at the right (Fig. 3) there appears the Centaur Eurytus, wearing a fez and mustachioed like a Turcoman, seizing Hippodamia by the hair (*Metamorphoses*, XII, 223), while Theseus prepares to slay him by striking him full in the face with the silver ewer, or what Piero imagined to be the ancient crater, a vessel for mixing wine, described by Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, XII, 235–237). Hercules also appears, in splendid isolation at the far left, dispatching a Centaur with his fabled club (Fig. 4). We might observe in passing that Michelangelo, though certainly sensitive to the primal violence of the brawl, avoided the literal specificity of Ovid's narrative, as well as Piero di Cosimo's cruelly anecdotal detail, concerning himself instead with rendering heroic figures in powerful action.

The second local myth of a battle between Hercules and the Centaurs is an Arcadian myth transmitted to Poliziano by the Pseudo-Apollodorus. It occurs at Mount Pholoe on the border of Arcadia with Elis. Hercules, at the time of his pursuit of the Erymanthean boar, was given hospitality by the Centaur Pholos, who served the hero cooked meat, eating his own raw (as was the custom of the primitive and brutish Centaurs). Pholos opened a jar of wine that Dionysus

[16] Lisner (note 3), figs. 24 and 25, pp. 328f.

[17] Elena Capretti, in: *Giovinezza di Michelangelo* (note 4), pp. 210–212, no. 9. See also *eadem*, in: Anna Forlani Tempesti/Elena Capretti, *Piero di Cosimo: catalogo completo*, Florence 1996, p. 111, no. 17d; Dennis Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange*, New Haven, Conn./London 2006, pp. 95–100; and especially Vincenzo Farinella, "'Il dolce miele



2 Piero di Cosimo, *The battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*. London, National Gallery

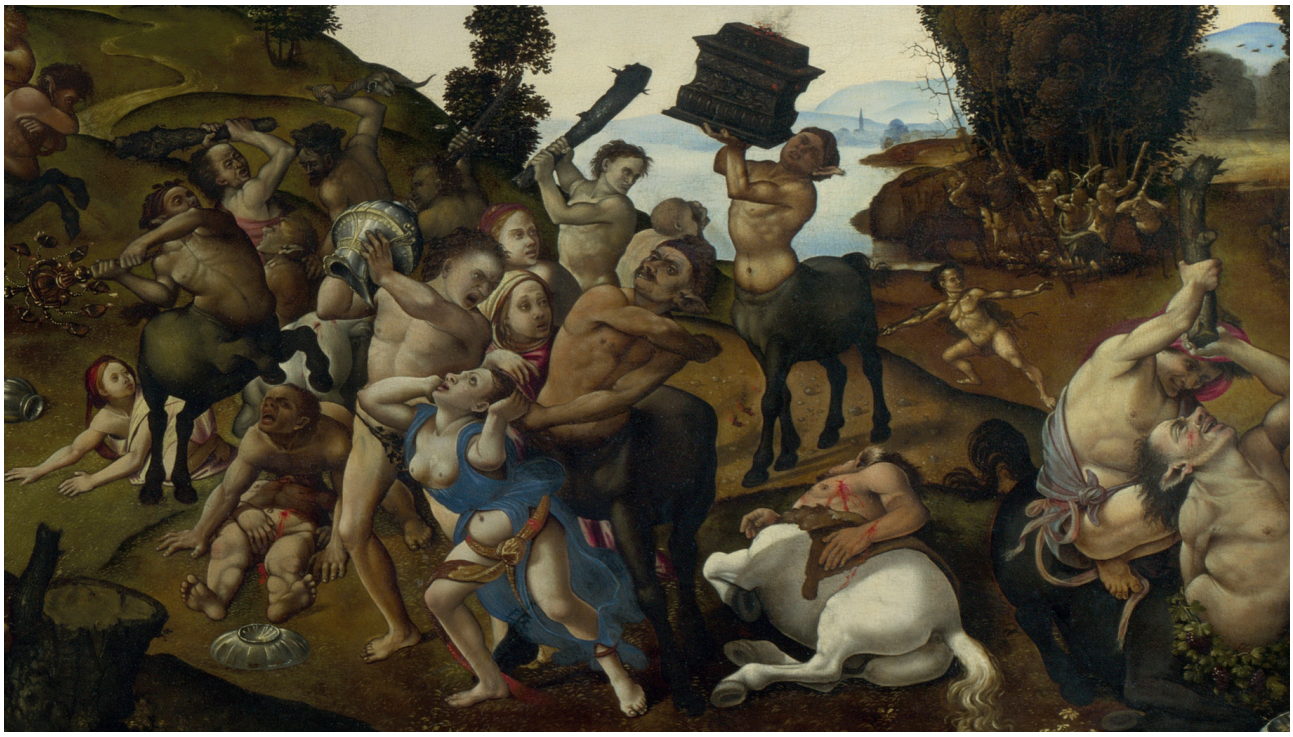
had presented to all the Centaurs in common. They, attracted by the scent of the wine, swarmed around the cave of Pholos and demanded their share. Armed with rocks and uprooted pine trees, the Centaurs fell upon Hercules but were in turn routed by him and many killed.[18] This version of the myth is important for our purposes, not because the story (which is not about a wedding, and moreover includes no women) is a direct basis for Michelangelo's imagery, but because Poliziano himself, in a comment to Ovid's *Fasti*, cites it, adding the crucial observation that "in Thessaly, however, this battle was waged at the nuptials of Hippodamia". His comment, to which we shall return, not only establishes that Poliziano knew more than one version of the myth and understood their interrelationship – but also that, despite their differences (for example, exchanging Hercules for Theseus) all were in fact variants of the same, extremely ancient myth. Furthermore, he names his source. This is not an ancient writer, but Demetrius Triclinius, a fourteenth-century Palaeologan scholar and author of a treatise on the Labors of Hercules, perhaps composed as an appendix to Sophocles's *Trachiniae* or, likelier, to Pseudo-Apollodorus's listing of the twelve Labors in the *Bibliotheca*.[19]

With the third version of the myth we strike gold. It originates in Achaea, again as a side story to one of the Labors of Hercules. In this version, which we have already summarized above, the myth tells of how Hercules, while a guest of Dexamenus, seduced the king's daughter, Deianira, promising to marry her; and how the Centaur Eurytion intimidated Dexamenus into giving Deianira to him instead, provoking Hercules's battle with the Centaurs at the nuptial feast.

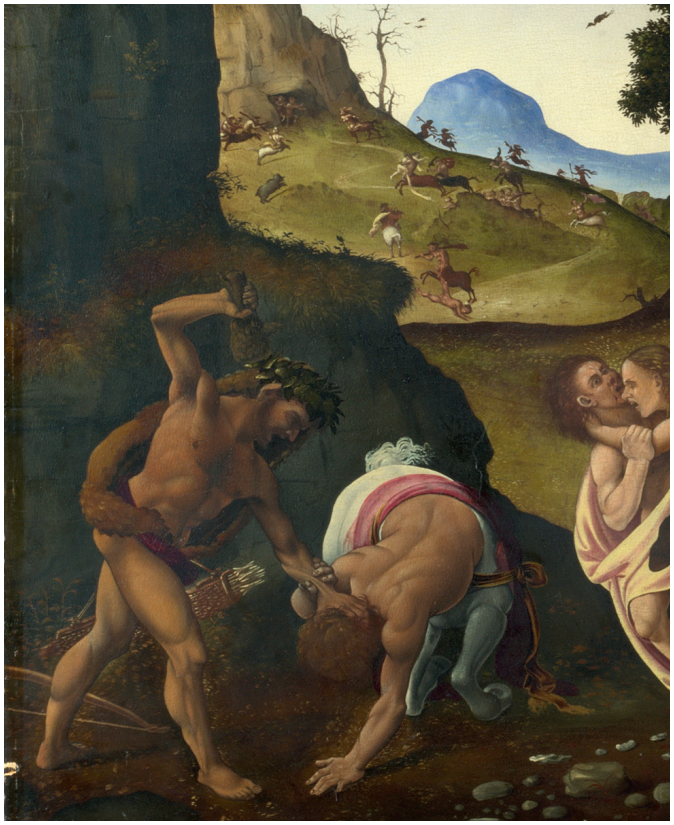
delle muse': Piero di Cosimo e la tradizione lucreziana a Firenze", in: *Piero di Cosimo 1462–1522: pittore eccentrico fra Rinascimento e Maniera*, exh. cat., ed. by Elena Capretti *et al.*, Florence 2015, pp. 107–121.

[18] Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, II, v, 4. I have used the Loeb Library edition, published before its author acquired the "Pseudo". Here, I have also followed Poliziano's summary of the myth, cited in note 19. Depictions of the battle at Pholoe are common in Greek art. See *The Centaur's Smile: The Human Animal in Early Greek Art*, exh. cat. Princeton 2003, ed. by J. Michael Padgett, New Haven, Conn., 2003, figs. 17 and 18, and nos. 29, 33, and 34. And see further Karl Schefold/Franz Jung, *Die Urkönige, Perseus, Bellerophon, Herakles und Theseus in der klassischen und hellenistischen Kunst*, Munich 1988, pp. 170f.

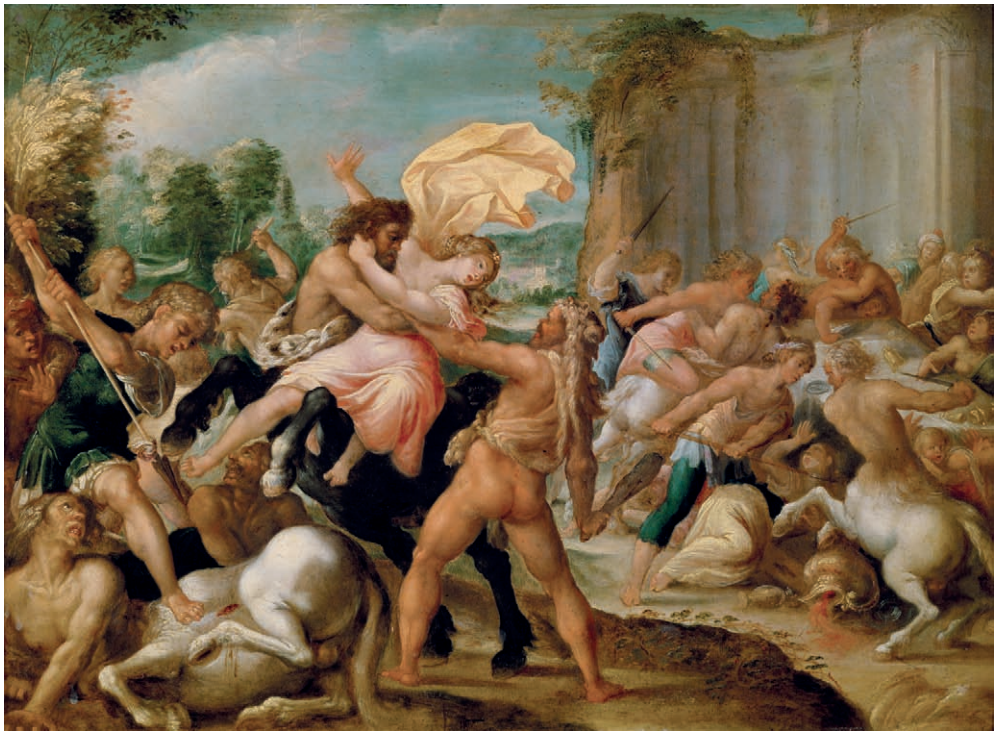
[19] Angelo Poliziano, *Commento inedito ai Fasti di Ovidio*, ed. by Francesco Lo Monaco, Florence 1991, p. 177: "Ex Demetrio Triclinio colligitur proelium Herculis adversus Centauros in Pholoe fuisse Arcadiae sylva, quia, cum ad aprum Erymantheum iret, Hercules exceptus est hospitio a Pholo Centauro, qui ei coctas praebuit carnes; ille maluit crudas, tum hausit ex communi dolio Centaurorum vinum eoque se ingurgitavit. Odorem secuti Centauri cum lapidibus atque avulsis arboribus in Herculem fecere impetum, quos ille fugavit et partim interfecit. In Thessalia autem bellum est gestum in nuptiis Hippodamiae." Demetrius Triclinius was a pupil of Planudes, taught at Thessalonica, and specialized in the study and reconstruction of ancient Greek poetic meters.



3 Piero di Cosimo,
The battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs, detail from Fig. 2: the Centaur Eurytus seizing Hippodamia



4 Piero di Cosimo,
The battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs, detail from Fig. 2: Hercules dispatching a Centaur



5 Hans Rottenhammer, *Hercules delivering Deianira from the Centaur Eurytion*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Several ancient authors refer to this fable, Pausanias among them,[20] as well as Pseudo-Apollodorus and Diodorus Siculus, although the former names the daughter of King Dexamenus as Mnesimache,[21] and the latter Hippolyte.[22] The *locus classicus* for the myth, however, as Strzygowski pointed out, is chapter XXXI and especially XXXIII of Hyginus's *Fabulae*. In the first of these, the tale is epitomized thus: "Hercules killed the Centaur Eurytion, who sought his betrothed Deianira, daughter of Dexamenus, for his wife."[23] In the latter, it is told at greater length:

> When Hercules came as a guest to King Dexamenus, he took the virginity of his daughter Deianira,

[20] Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, Greek and English, trans. by W. H. S. Jones, Cambridge, Mass./London ⁶1977, pp. 270f. (VII, 18, 1): "Some forty stades from Dyme the river Peirus flows down to the sea; on the Peirus once stood the Achaean city of Olenus. The poets who have sung of Hercules and his labors have found a favorite subject in Dexamenus, king of Olenus, and the entertainment Hercules received at his court. That Olenus was from the beginning a small town I find confirmed in an elegiac poem composed by Hermesianax about Eurytion the Centaur."

[21] Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, Greek and English, trans. by James George Frazer, Cambridge, Mass./London ⁶1976, II, pp. 196f. (II, v, 5): "Hercules made his way to the home of Dexamenus in Olenus. He found his host about to be compelled to announce the engagement of his daughter Mnesimache to the Centaur Eurytion. As Eurytion came to claim his bride, Dexamenus asked Hercules for help, and Hercules slew Eurytion."

[22] Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, Greek and English, trans. by C. H. Oldfather, Cambridge, Mass./London ⁴1967, pp. 446f. (4, 33): "Hercules returned to Olenus to Dexamenus. The latter's daughter, Hippolyte, was being joined in marriage to Azan, and when Hercules, as he sat at the wedding feast, observed the Centaur Eurytion acting in an insulting manner towards Hippolyte and endeavored to do violence to her, he slew him."

[23] Hyginus, *Fabulae*, XXXI: "Eurytionem centaurum, quod Deianiram Dexameni filiam speratam suam uxorem petiit, [Hercules] occidit."

> pledging his faith that he would make her his wife. After his departure the Centaur Eurytion, son of Ixion and Nubis, demanded Deianira for his wife; to whom her father, fearing his strength, promised her. On the appointed day he came with his brothers to the nuptials. Hercules returned, killed the Centaur, and carried off his betrothed. Likewise, at another wedding, when Pirithoüs took Hippodamia, daughter of Adrastus, to wife, the Centaurs, filled with wine, snatched up the wives of the Lapiths. The Centaurs killed many of them and perished at their hands.[24]

This very passage, incidentally, is clearly the basis for a painting attributed to Hans Rottenhammer in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Fig. 5), datable to about 1600. Not surprisingly, older catalogues of the collection in Vienna give the subject of Rottenhammer's painting as the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs, but recently it has been correctly retitled *Hercules delivering Deianira from the Centaur Eurytion*, undoubtedly on the basis of Hyginus's *Fabulae*, XXXIII, just quoted, and undoubtedly because it is unambiguously Hercules with his lion-skin and club, and not Pirithoüs or Theseus, who is the hero in the mêlée provoked by Eurytion and his brothers at the wedding banquet.[25] Similarly, Eurytion, in my opinion, is likely the name of the Centaur being violently dispatched by Hercules in Giambologna's spectacular sculpture in the Loggia dei Lanzi, commonly identified by the simpler, and more generic, title *Hercules and the Centaur*.[26]

So far as Poliziano and the subject of Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs* are concerned, however, at this point a serious problem arises. As we have seen, it is Josef Strzygowski's great merit to have been the first, in 1891, to draw attention to the relevance of Hyginus's *Fabulae* for understanding Michelangelo's relief.[27] His discovery unequivocally established the actuality of an ancient myth that reconciled Condivi and Varchi's calling it the *Rape of Deianira and the brawl of the Centaurs* with Vasari's title, the *Battle of Hercules with the Centaurs*. At a stroke Strzygowski exposed the emptiness of Wickhoff's suggestion that Poliziano had confused Deianira with Plutarch's Deidamia. He was further able to demonstrate that the subject Poliziano proposed and carefully explained to the young Michelangelo was not in any simple sense the Thessalian myth of the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs as told by Ovid. It was instead an Achaean version of that selfsame myth, which is something explicitly stated by Hyginus himself when narrating the myth of Hercules and Eurytion's rape of Deianira: "Item aliis in nuptiis, Pirithous Hippodamiam Adrasti filiam cum uxorem duceret [...]."[28] In this version Hercules and Deianira take the place of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia as marriage celebrants. The Centaur Eurytion, alias Eurytus, is the same in both

[24] *Ibidem*, XXXIII: "Hercules cum in hospitium ad Dexamenum regem venisset, eiusque filiam Deianiram devirginasset, fidemque dedisset se eam uxorem ducturum, post discessum eius Eurytion Ixionis et Nubis filius centaurus petit Deianiram uxorem: cuius pater vim timens pollicitus est se daturum. Die constituto venit cum fratribus ad nuptias. Hercules intervenit et Centaurum interfecit, suam speratam abduxit. Item aliis in nuptiis, Pirithous Hippodamiam Adrasti filiam cum uxorem duceret, vino pleni centauri conati sunt rapere uxores Lapithis. Eos Centauri multo interfecerunt, ab ipsis interiunt." It is noteworthy that Hyginus correctly identifies this myth as a variant of the story of the Lapiths and Centaurs at the nuptials of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia, just as Poliziano did for the Arcadian myth of Hercules's battle with the Centaurs at Pholoe (see note 19 above). To this point we shall return.

[25] See Sylvia Ferino-Pagden/Wolfgang Prohaska/Karl Schütz, *Die Gemäldegalerie des Kunsthistorischen Museums in Wien: Verzeichnis der Gemälde*, Vienna 1991, pl. 617. I have not been able to discover who first recognized the correct subject of Rottenhammer's painting, but I should like to acknowledge that person here.

[26] See John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, Oxford 1985, pp. 388f. and pl. 91.

[27] Strzygowski (note 14), p. 209.

[28] Hyginus, *Fabulae*, XXXIII (as cited and quoted in full above, note 24). Hyginus's noting the relationship, indeed virtual equivalence, of the twin myths of the heroes battling Centaurs at the nuptial banquet was astutely pointed out as early as 1907 by Karl Frey, *Michelagniolo Buonarroti: Quellen und Forschungen zu seiner Geschichte und Kunst*, Berlin 1907, p. 95.

versions. Moreover, we have already learned from the pen of Poliziano himself that the Arcadian tale of the mêlée at the banquet given Hercules by the Centaur Pholos, when many Centaurs were killed, is a third version of the same myth, even though no women, much less a wedding, are part of the story – in Poliziano's words when commenting on Hercules's battle with the Centaurs on Mount Pholoe: "In Thessalia autem bellum est gestum in nuptiis Hippodamiae."[29]

It is to Strzygowski's even greater credit, however, that before publishing his discovery he consulted Carl Robert, "mein[en] verehrte[n] Lehrer", and moreover quoted from Robert's letter in reply, which informed him that the text of Hyginus's *Fabulae* had only been published for the first time in 1535 by the German humanist Jacob Micyllus on the basis of a unique manuscript he had found in Freising near Munich, which Poliziano, who died in 1494, could hardly have known. The sole surviving manuscript, which was virtually destroyed in the printing process, had been written in Beneventan script, and Robert suggested the possibility that Poliziano may have known some other manuscript of the *Fabulae* preserved in Italy, now lost or as yet undiscovered; or, alternatively, that Poliziano knew a version of the myth recorded by the Second Vatican Mythographer or someone else from among the various later medieval writers on ancient mythology.[30] And indeed, if we follow Robert's lead (which Strzygowski apparently did not do), and turn to the Second Vatican Mythographer, we find the myth recorded under the heading "De Hercule et Deianira", clearly on the basis of first-hand knowledge of Hyginus's *Fabulae*, XXXIII:

> When Hercules came as a guest to King Examirus, he seduced his daughter Deianira and pledged his faith that he would make her his wife. After his departure, Eurycion sued for Deianira's hand, and her father, fearing his strength, promised her to him. On the day appointed, he came with his brothers to the nuptials. By chance, on the very day the nuptials were to be celebrated, Alcides returned, killed the Centaurs, and was himself joined in marriage to his betrothed Deianira.[31]

Moreover, in 1909 Carl Justi published yet another version of the myth,[32] which he found in Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, under the heading "De Eurito Ysionis filio":

> Euritus is one of the Centaurs, as Lactantius reports, who, coming to the house of Oeneus, king of Caledonia, requested marriage to Deianira, whom Hercules had sought out shortly before and pledged to take to wife. Oeneus, fearing his strength, promised her, and on the day appointed when Euritius was celebrating the nuptials Hercules returned and entered into battle with the Centaurs in attendance, killed them, and was himself joined in marriage to Deianira. In fact, Ovid does not have it this way, but rather says that when Pirithoüs took Hippodamia to wife and placed the table of the Centaurs in a grotto, the revelers filled with much wine grew heated, falling into venereal lewdness and unbridled insolence. When the bride Hippodamia was seized by Euritus, who was dragging her away, Pirithoüs, and also Theseus, rose up and fell into a tumultuous brawl with him and his companions; and when Theseus snatched Hippoda-

[29] Poliziano (note 19), p. 177.

[30] Strzygowski (note 14), p. 209. Needless to say, no other manuscript of Hyginus's *Fabulae* has as yet been found.

[31] "Hercules cum hospitio ad Examirum regem uenisset, Deianiram filiam eius corrupit et fidem dedit se eam uxorem sibi esse ducturum. Post eius discessum Euricion Deianiram petit quam pater uim timens Euricioni promisit qui constituto die cum fratribus ad nuptias uenit. Eo forte die, quo nuptiae celebrabantur, superueniens Alcides Centauros interfecit Deianiram que insperate suo matrimonio copulauit" (*Mythographi Vaticani I et II*, ed. by Péter Kulcsár, Turnhout 1987, no. 187, p. 241).

[32] Carl Justi, *Michelangelo: Neue Beiträge zur Erklärung seiner Werke*, Berlin 1909, I, pp. 22–31.

> mia away from Euritus, he killed him with a crater he had laid hold of with effort.[33]

Finally, attention should be paid to Boccaccio's citation of his own source for the fable, namely Lactantius Placidus, a fifth-century CE grammarian and the author of commentaries to Statius's *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*. And indeed, when commenting on *Thebaid*, V, 263, where Statius calls the Centaurs "Nubigenae" and describes the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs on Mount Ossa in Thessaly:

> No wilder are the wanton banquets of the Lapiths on frozen Ossa, when the ones born from a cloud grow heated from wine deep-drunk. Scarcely has the first pallor of wrath seized them when, overturning the tables, they rise up to do battle[34]

we find Lactantius Placidus, Hyginus's *Fabula* XXXIII clearly to hand, writing:

> Cloud-born. He touches on the fable of Hercules, who, while a guest of King Dexamenus, seduced his daughter Deianira, promising that he would make her his wife. After his departure, the Centaur Eurytion, son of Ixion, requested Deianira for himself. Her father, fearing Eurytion's strength, promised her to him, who came with his brothers on the day constituted for the nuptials. By chance, on the very day the nuptials were celebrated Alcides returned, killed the Centaurs, and was himself unexpectedly joined in marriage to Deianira.[35]

It is therefore clear that, while it is highly unlikely that Poliziano could have known Hyginus's *Fabulae*, nevertheless the fable of Hercules, Deianira, the Centaur Eurytion, and the battle with the Centaurs was certainly available to him via Lactantius Placidus, whose version of the myth is especially close to Hyginus's telling of it, as well as via the Second Vatican Mythographer and Boccaccio (who indeed cites Lactantius Placidus by name), all of them authors Poliziano without question did know and would certainly have consulted.[36] To this list of late antique and medieval writers we may tentatively add the Byzantine scholar Demetrius Triclinius, author of a short

[33] "Euritus ex Centauris unus, ut refert Lactantius, in domum Oenei regis Calidonie veniens, Deyaniram, quam paulo ante Hercules petierat et fidem prestaverat se illam in uxorem ducturum, postulavit in coniugem. Oeneus vim timens spopondit, et constituto die, dum nuptias Euritius celebraret, supervenit Hercules et inito cum Centauris ibidem existentibus certamine, eos occidit, et Deyaniram sibi matrimonio copulavit. Ovidius vero non sic, quin imo dicit quod cum Perithous duxisset Yppodamiam coniugem, et posuisset in antro mensas Centauris, et ipsi epulantes vino plurimo caluissent, in lasciviam venere et audaciam nimiam et capiente Euritio Yppodamiam atque trahente eam, insurrexit Perythous atque Theseus, et turbati casu adversus eum et socios inivere pugnam, et cum abstulisset Theseus Yppodamiam Euritio, eum conantem manibus cratere sumpto interfecit" (Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*, ed. by Vincenzo Romano, Bari 1951, II, p. 473 [Book IX, chap. XXIX]).

[34] "[…] gelida non saevius Ossa / luxuriant Lapitharum epulae, si quando profundo / Nubigenae caluere mero: vix primus ab ira / pallor, et impulsis surgunt ad proelia mensis" (Statius, *Thebaid*, Latin and English, trans. by J. H. Mozley, Cambridge, Mass./London ⁴1969, V, 261–264, pp. 22f.).

[35] "Nubigenae. Herculis fabulam tangit. qui cum in hospitio ad Dexamenum regem venisset, Deianiram filiam eius corrupit et fidem dedit se eam uxorem esse ducturum. post eius discessum Eurytion Ixionis filius Centaurus uxorem Deianiram petiit. quam pater vim timens Eurytioni promisit, qui constituto die cum fratribus ad nuptias venit. eo forte die, quo nuptiae celebrantur, superveniens Alcides Centauros interfecit, Deianiramque insperate suo matrimonio copulavit" (*Lactantii Placidi qui dicitur Commentarios in Statii Thebaida et Commentarium in Achilleida*, ed. by Richard Jahnke, Lipsia 1898, p. 275). Statius explicitly refers to the Thessalian myth of the Lapiths and Centaurs in the passage here being commented upon by Lactantius Placidus (see note 34), and Jahnke accordingly notes that some manuscripts add the following: "Centauri, cum in matrimonium Pirithous Hippodamiam duceret, vino pleni Lapitharum uxores conati sunt rapere. qui omnes a Lapithis occisi sunt. unde Virgilius [*Georgica*, II, 455–457]." The verses from Virgil's *Georgics* are: "Bacchus et ad culpam causas dedit; ille furentis / Centauros leto domuit, Rhoetumque Pholumque / et magno Hylaeum Lapithis cratere minantem." Boccaccio, as quoted in note 32 above, also takes note of the similarity of the story to that of the wedding of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia. Lactantius Placidus is an author widely quoted by Boccaccio, not to mention Coluccio Salutati, and he was certainly known to Poliziano (see his *Commento inedito alle Satire di Perseo*, ed. by Lucia Cesarini Martinelli/Roberto Ricciardi, Florence 1985, p. 46 and "Indice degli Autori", pp. 145 and 153).

treatise on the Labors of Hercules, which we have seen Poliziano respectfully citing in his comment to Ovid's reference in the *Fasti* to Mount Pholoe, site of the Arcadian version of Hercules's battle with the Centaurs. Maddeningly, however, Triclinius's treatise, which circulated together with Pseudo-Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca* (where the twelve Labors are listed), is lost, and Poliziano, in an even more maddening note to the list of the Labors of Hercules in his personal copy of the *Bibliotheca*, writes that "I omit discussion of these twelve trials, which are found in Triclinius" ("XII certamina omitto quod apud Triclinium sunt").[37] Even so, Triclinius's treatise is at least partially reflected in another short work on the Labors of Hercules, which also circulated together with Pseudo-Apollodorus and was written by another Palaeologan scholar, John Pediasimus. Pediasimus does indeed mention the story of Hercules and the daughter of King Dexamenus, whom he names Mnesimache, following Pseudo-Apollodorus (and very likely Triclinius).[38]

There can accordingly be no lingering doubts of Condivi's accuracy in naming Michelangelo's subject, given and explained to him by Poliziano, as "il Ratto di Deianira e la Zuffa de' Centauri". The same is true for Varchi's testimony, which acknowledges, as we have seen, the relevance of Ovid's telling of the immemorially ancient fable of the rioting Centaurs, substituting Hercules for Theseus and Deianira for Hippodamia even as he quotes Ovid's verse, "ebrietas geminata libidine", when giving Michelangelo's sculpture the lengthy (and precise) title, "la zuffa de' Centauri, quando eglino non meno riscaldati dal vino, che caldi d'amore rapirono d'in sul piu bello del convito forzatamente Deianíra piangente, e gridante soccorso in vano". Both Condivi and Varchi refer to the same fable, as does Vasari (the only contemporary witness to name Hercules directly) with his more abbreviated naming of Michelangelo's subject as "la Battaglia di Ercole coi Centauri". Indeed, we have already seen Hyginus in antiquity, Boccaccio in the Middle Ages, and Poliziano himself when commenting on the battle of Hercules and the Centaurs at Pholoe, all identifying the myth of Hercules, Deianira, and Eurytion as part of the same recension to which the myth of Eurytus and the battle of Lapiths and Centaurs as sung by Ovid also belongs. There is no philological reason to question the overall coherence of their collective witness, nor to question the relevance of the testimony each brings to Michelangelo's sculpture. Nor did the relevance of each of the ancient and medieval texts we have thus far discussed, each of which narrates the fable of Hercules, Eurytion, and the daughter of Dexamenus, escape the watchful eye of Margrit Lisner, who cited them all in a single footnote.[39]

4.

Nevertheless, despite her recognition of the relevance of these texts, in the end Lisner opted for an allegorical reading of Michelangelo's subject, taking as her point of departure Leopold Ettlinger's classic study, published eight years before in the Florentine *Mitteilungen*, entitled "Hercules Florentinus".[40] Thanks to Ettlinger's development of arguments set out in Erwin Panofsky's *Renaissance and Renascences*, it had been firmly established that in the earlier phases

[36] See further Poliziano's commentary to Ovid's *Fasti* (note 19), p. 104, where he comments on *Fasti*, I, 491: "Tydeus: [...] Hic, ut Lactantius Statii interpres ait, teste Boccaccio [...]." Most recently, see Giulia Torello-Hill, "Angelo Poliziano's *De poesi et poetis* (BNCF Naz. II.I.99) and the Development of Ancient Dramatic Criticism", in: *I Tatti*, XX (2017), pp. 105–126, for a discussion of Poliziano's engagement with the celebrated Book XIV of Boccaccio's *Genealogia*.

[37] See Lo Monaco's introduction to Poliziano's commentary to Ovid's *Fasti* (note 19), p. xxxiv; and Augusto Guida, review of "Angelo Poliziano, Commento inedito alle Selve di Stazio, a cura di L. Cesarini Martinelli, Firenze, Sansoni ed. 1978", in: *Prometheus*, VII (1981), pp. 189f.

[38] See *Apollodori Bibliotheca: Pediasimi libellus De duodecim Herculis laboribus*, ed. by Richard Wagner, Lipsia 1926.

[39] Lisner (note 3), p. 335, note 17.

[40] Leopold D. Ettlinger, "Hercules Florentinus", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XVI (1972), pp. 119–142.

of Italian humanism, greatly influenced by later medieval allegorical interpretations of the classical myths, Hercules was often interpreted allegorically, sometimes as a Christian antetype (as in Nicola Pisano's sculpture on the pulpit of the Pisa baptistry, where he appears as a personification of Christian fortitude),[41] sometimes as an ethical *exemplum virtutis* (as in Coluccio Salutati's *De laboribus Herculis*). In the particular instance of Florence, Hercules often appears as the embodiment of the city's liberty, as the tyrannicide in a political allegory whereby he battles with and slays the Centaurs, who personify the immoderate appetites of tyrants. As such he was represented on the late Duecento seal of the Florentine Republic, which bore the inscription HERCVLEA CLAVA DOMAT FLORENCIA PRAVA, merging Herculean virtue with that of the city, which wields Hercules's fabled club in a battle against wrongdoing. The fusing of Florentine *virtù* in defense of liberty with Hercules the tyrannicide is made explicit in Goro Dati's interpretation of the seal of the Republic, written at the turn of the Tre- to the Quattrocento: "L'Ercole, il quale portano ne' suggelli del Comune, e con detto segno suggellano le lettere, a significazione, che Ercole fu giogante, che andava spegnendo tutti i Tyranni e iniquie signorie, e così hanno fatto i Fiorentini."[42] At about the same time, Francesco Sacchetti invoked Hercules as the embodiment of Florentine opposition to the Visconti tyrants in Milan. And, as Lisner went on to add to Ettlinger's account, by the end of the Quattrocento we find Cristoforo Landino adopting the same interpretation in words put into the mouth of Lorenzo de' Medici: "Fuit sapiens Hercules [...] crudelissimos tyrannos coercuit; plurimus populis ac nationibus ius libertatemque restituit."[43] The same appears in Landino's commentary to Dante's *Inferno*, XII, 52–72, where Dante and Virgil encounter the Centaurs Chiron, Nessus, and Pholus "che fu sì pien d'ira"; about which Landino writes, "e certo tutte l'imprese inconsiderate de' furiosi tiranni, sono uccise da Hercole, cioè son vinte da gli huomini prudenti, e forti come intendiamo per Hercole."[44] Decisive for Lisner, however, was the fact that Landino had been the greatly admired teacher and later colleague of Poliziano himself, who praised him thus in a letter of 1493 to Bartolomeo Scala: "Landinus [...] praeceptor olim meus, nunc autem utriusque nostrum college, magnae vir in literis auctoritatis et celebritatis".[45] Because of his respect for Landino's learning, so Lisner reasoned, Poliziano would have followed his teacher and colleague in taking Hercules to be, broadly speaking, the embodiment of a political allegory pitting civic virtue in defense of liberty against the forces of tyranny, personified by the Centaurs; or possibly even, as Ettlinger had gone on to argue, as an emblem for Lorenzo de' Medici in the guise of protector of Florentine liberty against oppression by tyrants.[46]

The argument is skillfully prosecuted, and there is no doubt that Florentines of the Tre- and Quattrocento often deployed the figure of Hercules as an important civic emblem. Moreover Lisner, by

[41] As Ettlinger wrote, *ibidem*, p. 120: "Even if the heroic nude figure, Nicola's Fortitudo, is the result of a re-awakened interest in classical art, no artist could have made Hercules into an allegory of Virtue if literary Christianising interpretations of the classical hero had not preceded him."

[42] Quoted from *ibidem*, p. 121.

[43] Lisner (note 3), p. 311.

[44] Quoted from *ibidem*. It seems to have escaped Lisner's (and Ettlinger's) net that Landino again, in his *Proemio* to the *Comento sopra la Comedia*, refers to the image of Hercules as a symbol for Florence, and as such appears on the seal of the Comune: "*Praeterea* scelse tra' fiori el giglio, tra gl'animali el lione per suo segno, tra gl'uomini eccellenti Ercole, imagine di suo sigillo" (Cristoforo Landino, *Scritti critici e teorici*, ed. by Roberto Cardini, Rome 1974, I, p. 128).

[45] Lisner (note 3), pp. 311 and 338, note 56.

[46] See, however, Alison Wright, "The Myth of Hercules", in: *Lorenzo il Magnifico e il suo mondo*, conference proceedings Florence 1992, ed. by Gian Carlo Garfagnini, Florence 1994, pp. 323–339, who pointed out that the cornerstone of Ettlinger's theory that the Hercules myth was specifically Laurentian was Vasari's statement that Pollaiuolo's paintings of the *Labors of Hercules* were commissioned by Lorenzo. However, in 1494 Pollaiuolo had claimed they were made thirty years before, that is, when Lorenzo's

summoning Landino as a witness, brings us within a single step of Poliziano, Landino's student and Michelangelo's tutor in realizing the theme of his youthful sculpture, to which we may confidently give the accurate, if cumbersome, title of *Hercules delivering his betrothed Deianira from the Centaur Eurytion in a brawl with the Centaurs at the banquet prepared for her forced marriage to Eurytion*. But that step is a giant step, for Landino is not Poliziano. If he is to be compared to a scholar of the previous generation, Poliziano as a humanist is better compared to Lorenzo Valla as a deviser and prime practitioner of the new philology. Poliziano's scholarship is not directed to philosophical, political, or Christian allegorical interpretation of the ancient fables, but is instead based on close historical and linguistic comparison and analysis of the ancient texts, such as we find it practiced in Poliziano's *Commenti* to various ancient authors in his lectures at the Studio Fiorentino, as well as in his letters to friends and fellow scholars, and in his celebrated *Miscellanea*. Ettlinger was sensitive to the problems of interpretive decorum raised by this transitional moment of later Quattrocento humanism, and he worried about when it might be appropriate to apply a 'medieval' allegorical interpretation to a work of art, or when such a work might better be understood in terms of a purer 'Renaissance' classicism. Thus, he contrasted Richard Krautheimer's claim that Hercules and other classical figures appearing on the jambs of the Porta della Mandorla were instances of a 'straightforward' classical revival to Erwin Panofsky's contrary view that, because these figures alternate with angels adorning a portal of the Duomo, they were open to an *interpretatio christiana*. Ettlinger himself favored a third possibility, seeing them as political allegories of civic virtue, embodied in the figure of Hercules.[47] However, he wisely concluded: "An answer [...] can only be found if we look in each case at the context in which [Hercules] makes his appearance." This is especially true regarding the problem of aligning Poliziano's philological methods with the subject he proposed to Michelangelo, almost exactly a century after the sculptures of the Porta della Mandorla.

5.

At this point, it is impossible to resist comparing Michelangelo's situation to that once occupied by Poliziano himself, who had gained his own entry into the Medici house when, in 1470, at the age of sixteen, he was proclaimed the *Homericus adolescens* by no less than Marsilio Ficino in recognition of his translation into Latin hexameters of Books II–V of the *Iliad*. The mature Homer was now blessed with his own adolescent Phidias, and though we cannot know exactly what Poliziano said to Michelangelo in explicating the myth of Eurytion and Hercules's battle at the wedding banquet prepared by the Centaur for himself and Deianira, it is possible to make some observations.

As an artistic problem, the fable Poliziano assigned the untried Michelangelo was designed to

father, Piero di Cosimo, was still head of the family. See also Wolfger A. Bulst, "Uso e trasformazioni del palazzo mediceo fino ai Riccardi", in: *Il palazzo Medici Riccardi di Firenze*, ed. by Giovanni Cherubini/Giovanni Fanelli, Florence 1990, pp. 98–124, esp. p. 113. Both Wright and Bulst believe that Pollaiuolo's Herculean subjects do invoke Florentine civic imagery more generally.

[47] Ettlinger (note 40), p. 126; see further Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, London 1976, esp. pp. 82–100, for the *interpretatio christiana*. It is inescapable that Hercules, like David and Judith, carried political meaning for the Florentines as embodying the *virtù* of the city; and it is also true that the Medici owned many works of art taking Hercules for their subject. In the instance of Michelangelo's *Battle of Hercules against Eurytion* the *storia* derives from an ancient mythological narrative reconstituted by Poliziano. Immediately after, Michelangelo sculptured a single figure of Hercules, almost certainly commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici's son Piero, which took the form of a political allegory. See Caroline Elam, "Art in the Service of Liberty: Battista della Palla, Art Agent for Francis I", in: *I Tatti Studies*, V (1993), pp. 33–109; and especially Francesco Caglioti, *Donatello e i Medici: storia del David e della Giuditta*, Florence 2000, I, pp. 261–265 (with further bibliography). However, as Ettlinger noted (p. 139), the story of Hercules under the Medici dukes in the sixteenth century is a different chapter that has been told by others.

6 Michelangelo,
The battle of the Centaurs,
detail from Fig. 1: Deianira

present the fifteen-year-old sculptor with real challenges. Sculptured within a severely limited space, it tells a tale of strenuous action and high passion, comprised of multiple episodes and many figures – twenty-six by the count of Francesco Bocchi – male and female, human and hybrid, half-man, half-beast, all caught up in a whirlwind of violent conflict. In helping Michelangelo control and focus the narrative, Poliziano, when explaining the *storia* to him "a parte per parte", manifestly isolated topoi in Ovid's account of Eurytus initiating the brawl at the wedding banquet, followed by his death at the hands of Theseus, which takes only eighteen verses in the telling (*Metamorphoses*, XII, 219–237). In so doing, recognizing that the battle with the banqueting Centaurs was a third myth, essentially the same in both versions, Poliziano substituted the Achaean fable of the marriage of Hercules and Deianira for the more ancient Thessalian myth of the nuptials of Pirithoüs and Hippodamia sung by Ovid, at the same time retaining topoi from Ovid's description of the brawl with the Centaurs as an element common to each.

One such topos, as we have seen, was identified by Varchi when he described Michelangelo's sculpture as "la zuffa de' Centauri [...] non meno riscaldati dal vino, che caldi d'amore", which echoes Ovid's characterization of Eurytus, "quam vino pectus, tam virgine visa / ardet, et ebrietas geminata libidine regnat", initiating the mêlée by violently carrying off the bride. Varchi also singled out a second Ovidian topos, the motif of the bride seized and dragged away by the hair (Fig. 6), which derives from Ovid's "raptaturque comis per vim nova nupta prehensis", and which, as we have also learned from Francesco Bocchi, it was Michelangelo's genius to have imagined in the figure of a woman pushing back with both hands against the arm of her abductor as he violently pulls her away by the hair. This can only be Deianira, "la sposa che è rapita" in Bocchi's description, despite the fact that she seems to be fought over not by Hercules and Eurytus but two male figures one who pulls her by the hair into the path of the deadly battle between Hercules and Eurytus and one who tries to save her by holding her back. The reason for the anomaly is that, whereas Ovid's verses describe separate moments in the story – the abduction of Hippodamia by the drunken Eurytus, which initiates the brawl, and the death of Eurytus at the hands of Theseus, which ends it – Michelangelo, on the other hand, shows the hero, Hercules, disrupting Eurytus's wedding to Deianira, to whom both had been promised by her timid father, King Dexamenus. He attacks the Centaur, while the two male figures pull the bride in different directions. It is Hercules, not a drunken

Centaur, who initiates the brawl common to both versions of the myth, and it is this that accounts for the ambiguities in Michelangelo's rendering of Deianira, who is not carried off by Centaurs in the Achaean redaction of the story. For Michelangelo she is the eye of the storm, the nodal point around which all chaos swirls. Her very centrality, if not literal fidelity to a single text, justifies Condivi's emphasis in naming Michelangelo's subject as "il Ratto di Deianira e la Zuffa de' Centauri".

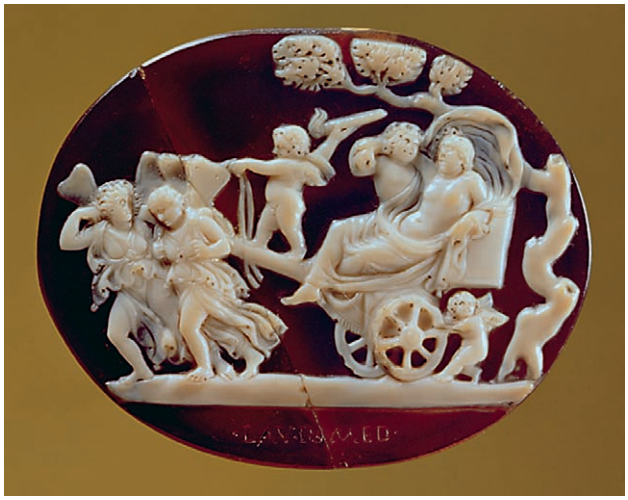
A third topos in Ovid's narrative tells of Eurytus's death at the hands of the hero, Hercules in Michelangelo's adaptation (Fig. 7), who hurls an ancient crater, or vessel for mixing wine, decorated with figures in relief, full into the Centaur's face:

> There chanced to be standing nearby an antique mixing jar, rough with projecting figures; this Theseus, rising to his fullest height, himself caught up and hurled full into the other's face.[48]

It is remarkable how few are the weapons actually represented in Michelangelo's sculpture, principally the bow, barely sketched in, pulled by the male figure in the upper left corner, and the boulders hefted by the elderly bald man (Nestor?) below him and by Hercules, who hurls a massive boulder flush into the face of the rearing Centaur Eurytus, shown in the center of the relief. But here an interesting possibility arises. The relief is unfinished, owing to its abandonment at the death of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1492, and the impression that rocks are flying everywhere is really an effect produced by the blocked-in heads of the combatants, which were never brought to completion. It is conceivable that what has always been read as a rock hurled at Eurytus by Hercules in the relief's actual state is in fact an area left in reserve for sculpturing what Michelangelo conceived to be the antique crater, "signis exstantibus", described by Ovid. This is conjecture, but nevertheless tempting in that Michelangelo seems to have recalled his idea for representing that crater either as an ancient vase or in the shape of the drinking cup held by the drunken Bacchus that he made for Cardinal Riario just about five years later, in 1496/97. Not only would the unworked stone block held by Hercules in the Centaur relief accommodate the bowl held by Bacchus, but also the vessel is rendered "signis exstantibus asper", that is, with sculptural decorations in rough relief.

7 Michelangelo,
The battle of the Centaurs,
detail from Fig. 1: Hercules

[48] "forte fuit iuxta signis exstantibus asper / antiquus crater; quem surgens vastior ipse / sustulit Aegides adversaque misit in ora" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Books IX–XV, transl. by Frank Justus Miller, revised by G. P. Goold, Cambridge, Mass., 1916, XII, 235–237.



8 Sostratos, *Dionysus on a chariot.* Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale

9 Bertoldo di Giovanni, *Dionysus on a chariot.* Florence, Palazzo Medici Riccardi, courtyard

6.

A final word. Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs* was with certainty carved when the young artist was lodged in the Medici palace and studying and working in the sculpture garden established by Lorenzo de' Medici at San Marco.[49] While a member of the household, in Condivi's words, he was affectionately treated and encouraged in his studies, not only by Poliziano, but also by the many distinguished men who frequented the palace and "especially by the Magnificent, who would call for him many times a day, showing him his jewels, carnelians, medals, and similar things of great value, for he knew him to be possessed of great intelligence and judgment".[50] It was undoubtedly from his study of gems by such Hellenistic master carvers as Dioskourides and Sostratos, whose sardonyx cameo of Dionysus in a chariot pulled by two winged women (Fig. 8) was one of eight gems from the Medici collection that were copied in the roundels adorning the frieze of the courtyard of the Medici palace, that Michelangelo developed a sense of quasi-Hellenistic scale, a quality independent of literal size. The roundels had been executed under Donatello's guidance by members of his workshop (ca. 1461–1465), and the one after Sostratos's cameo (Fig. 9) has been convincingly attributed to Bertoldo di Giovanni.[51] Bertoldo, the *custode* of Lorenzo's sculpture garden at San Marco, never failed to proudly proclaim himself a student of Donatello's, and by 1488 at the latest, two years before Michelangelo entered Lorenzo's household, had himself become a resident in the Medici palace.

[49] The classic studies of Lorenzo's sculpture garden have been written by Caroline Elam; see most recently: "*Custode* and *Capo*: Bertoldo di Giovanni in Lorenzo de' Medici's Sculpture Garden", in: *Bertoldo di Giovanni: The Renaissance of Sculpture in Medici Florence*, exh. cat., ed. by Aimee Ng/Alexander J. Noelle/Xavier F. Salomon, New York 2019, pp. 109–133.

[50] Condivi (note 5), pp. 12f.

[51] Francesco Caglioti, "Bertoldo's Place between Donatello and Michelangelo," in: *Bertoldo di Giovanni* (note 49), pp. 81–107, esp. pp. 90–94 and fig. 35.

10 Bertoldo di Giovanni, *Battle*. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello

It is hence unsurprising that Bertoldo's bronze relief of a Roman battle (Fig. 10), which both copies and substantially restores the imagery on a heavily damaged Roman battle sarcophagus, has often been cited as an artistic model for Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs*.[52] It was originally placed above a fireplace in a chamber in the Medici palace, and though some have objected that Bertoldo was primarily a master of bronze sculpture, different from marble carving, and that his *Battle* (45 × 99 cm) is much smaller than Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs* (90 × 84 cm), there can be no serious doubt of the aptness of the comparison, or that Bertoldo was in some sense a tutor, or at the very least a key link in the chain leading from Donatello, who had died in 1466, to Michelangelo.

Nevertheless, of particular relevance to Michelangelo's sculpture undoubtedly would have been a marble relief in the form of a frieze by Donatello himself that took as its subject the Ovidian theme of the rape of the Centaurs, and included a woman, undoubtedly Hippodamia, carried away on the crupper of a Centaur, undoubtedly Eurytus. It is now lost, but in the later sixteenth century could be seen in the house of Baccio Valori the Younger (popularly known as Palazzo dei Visacci), where it was placed over a door leading out of the courtyard. Donatello's *Rape of the Centaurs* was described by Francesco Bocchi thus:

> Oltra ciò egli ci ha sopra un uscio del Cortile in un marmo a guisa di fregio il Ratto de' Centauri di mano

[52] See *ibidem*, pp. 103–105; Scott Nethersole, *Art and Violence in Early Renaissance Florence*, New Haven, Conn./London 2018, pp. 199f.; *idem*, "Battling for Meaning: Bertoldo's Bronze Relief in the Bargello", in: *Bertoldo di Giovanni* (note 49), pp. 189–203. I am unconvinced by the suggestion, originally proffered by Lisner (note 3), pp. 316f., that the horseman in the center of Bertoldo's relief, wearing a Roman helmet, is Hercules.

di Donatello, di vista oltra ogni credenza maravigliosa. Perche è incredibile a dire, come siano nelle fattezze fieri, e nelle movenze agili, e destri: e formati da senno sommamente raro da chiunque molto intende, sono tenuti in sommo pregio. Si vede una femmina in groppa di un Centauro fatta da estremo sapere, ed in sua vista leggiadra ancora in sua picciolezza pare, che sia vera, e naturale.[53]

This suggests a possible destination intended by Lorenzo de' Medici for Michelangelo's sculpture, perhaps as an overdoor or adornment in the *cortile* of Palazzo Medici, recently decorated with the roundels installed under the aged Donatello's supervision. But this is purest speculation, and, in the absence of secure documentation, unknowable.

This study originated with an invitation from the late and much-lamented James Draper to speak on Angelo Poliziano and Michelangelo's Battle of the Centaurs *at a symposium devoted to the early Michelangelo held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in May of 2012. Subsequent research and writing for this publication was for the most part undertaken at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence. I am grateful to the staff of the institute and to its directors, Gerhard Wolf and Alessandro Nova, for the extraordinary hospitality and support given me during several summer visits.*

[53] Bocchi (note 1), pp. 179f.

Abstract

Both Condivi and Varchi report that the subject of Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs* was proposed and explained to him by Angelo Poliziano. This was *The rape of Deianira and the brawl of the Centaurs*. In this article I offer an account of the ancient and medieval sources for this myth as utilized by Poliziano in guiding the fifteen-year-old sculptor to an understanding of his theme. This subject was an Achaean variant of the Thessalian myth of Theseus's battle with the Centaurs at the nuptials of Hippodamia and Pirithoüs, substituting Hercules for Theseus and Deianira for Hippodamia. In both versions the arch-enemy was the Centaur Eurytion (Eurytus in Latin). In addition to explaining this obscure myth, Poliziano also isolated topoi (mainly from Ovid) to help the young sculptor imagine and organize his narrative.

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