Nessus’s Abduction of Deianira: 
A Subject For All Seasons

Yael Even

Jove’s son, Hercules, was returning with his new bride to his native city, when he came to the raging waters of Evenus. The river was fuller than usual, increased by winter’s rains, and it was impossible to cross the flood, with its swelling eddies. Hercules had no fear for himself, but he was troubled about his wife: then Nessus came up, strong of limb, and well acquainted with the fords. “I shall carry your wife across, and set her on the further bank,” he told Hercules. “You keep your strength for swimming!” So the Boetian hero trusted the centaur with his Calydonian princess, though she was pale with fear, equally afraid of the river and of Nessus. Hercules himself threw his club and his curved bow across the river; then, just as he was weighed down by his quiver and his lion skin, he shouted: “Let me complete the conquest of the river, already begun!” Without hesitation, without seeking to find where the flood was least fierce, he leaped into the stream, scorning to be carried across by the help of the current. He had reached the bank, and was picking up the bow he had thrown across, when he heard his wife’s cries, and realized that Nessus was preparing to betray his trust. “You scoundrel!” cried Hercules. Where are you off to, you fool, trusting in your speed of foot? You, Nessus the centaur, it is to you I am speaking! Pay heed, and do not come between me and mine. If you have no respect for me, surely the wheel on which your father is tormented should prevent you from alliances that are forbidden? Still, you will not escape, confident though you are in your horses’ hooves: for I shall overtake you, not on foot, but with my deadly weapons!” His actions made good his last words, for the arrow which he shot pierced the fleeing Nessus in the back. Its barbed tip protruded from his breast. (Ovid, Metamorphoses 9.11–126)1

Among the Greco-Roman myths of uncontrollable lust that gained currency in Italian Renaissance art, that of Nessus’s Abduction of Deianira has been the most exceptional but the least explored.2
Unlike such equally popular tales as Jupiter’s Rape of Europa and Apollo’s Pursuit of Daphne, the centaur’s assault on Hercules’s bride was not viewed categorically as a so-called heroic rape. Perpetrated by a subhuman creature against an extolled mythological demigod, it was originally perceived as a despicable deed and was depicted as a punishable offense. On the other hand, its sexually violent nature became gradually applauded because it was acknowledged and, therefore, accepted as a common expression of masculine aggression.

For this reason, Nessus’s near-violation of Deianira could be featured in either a bad or a good light. It could be showcased either as an act of treason or as that of carnal love. Indeed, fifteenth-century portrayals of the scene exemplify conflicting but coexistent attitudes toward the often forcible aspect of male desire. Although each extant image was created for a different purpose and a distinct private or public ambience, together they reflect widely accepted patriarchal norms of male sexual brutality and of female sexual victimization.

One of the earliest known representations of Nessus’s Abduction of Deianira and of Hercules’s Fight with Nessus is on the end panel of a cassone, or wedding chest, produced in Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco di Buono’s workshop and dated approximately 1450 (Fig.1). Portraying Nessus carrying Deianira away on the left and Hercules aiming an arrow in their direction on the right, its main purpose seems to have been the demonstration of the latter’s valor. The centaur does not appear either as forceful or as menacing as Hercules. His sexually motivated affront, which has prompted the latter’s swift counter-attack, does not look as ferocious as Ovid’s description of it. Quite the opposite, visualized more as a consensual than an enforced embrace, it features Deianira responding tenderly to Nessus’s advances by holding his human chest with her two arms, her face close to his. She may be shown as (and accused of) joining forces with her abductor rather than as trying to escape or as desperately calling for help. If one agrees with Pamela Gordon’s comments on Amy Richlin’s characterization of heroines in Ovidian scenes of rape, Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco di Buono may have envisioned Deianira as flattered and even charmed by the centaur’s overwhelming attraction to her (Gordon 282, 284). In their interpretation of the scene, she by no means resembles the Deianira in Sophocles’s Trachiniae who, as