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Fadda, Elisabetta. Come in un rebus: Correggio e la Camera di San Paolo

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documents a contested trust Erasmus funded for the Collegium Trilingue in Louvain (Allens' appendix 23); the second applies current medical knowledge to identify, with caution, Erasmus's ailments by their modern names.

James M. Estes's notes are excellent, even indispensable. Without them, many letters would be nested mysteries. Estes's introduction places the letters in their stormy historical context. When the volume appeared in the Allens' *Epistolae*, Europe was at war. Appearing in the midst of an international pandemic, *CWE 20* should be received with heightened sympathy for Erasmus's failing health and for his efforts to labour through it.

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Come in un rebus: Correggio e la Camera di San Paolo.

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“When faced with a sight we do not recognize, we call it an enigma. This is the case for the *Camera di San Paolo* painted in Parma by Antonio Allegri, known as Correggio,” writes Elisabetta Fadda on the book flap of her 2018 study, *Come in un rebus: Correggio e la Camera di San Paolo*. Her statement alludes not only to the challenge of interpreting the meaning of the room's appearance, but also to the history of scholars who described the room as a puzzle with no solution. Indeed, Cecil Gould, Roberto Longhi, Erwin Panofsky, and E. H. Gombrich all discussed the near impossibility of deciphering its meaning. More recently, David Ekserdjian devoted a chapter to the *Camera* in his monograph on Correggio (1999), in which he relegates earlier attempts at interpreting the room to “over-ingenious sophistry” (88) and states that, “in the midst of this often confused and confusing mass of critical erudition, the charm of the frescoes gets overlooked” (88).

What makes Elisabetta Fadda's attempt at deciphering the *Camera*'s program successful is that, rather than start her analysis by framing it squarely on the frescoes, she sets out to examine what factors came together to facilitate

the design and execution of the puzzling decorations. She builds her case by examining every available source—from the smallest detail in a letter written by the confessor of the room’s patroness, to an intimate and highly attentive examination of the writing on the wall, literally. Her contribution begins to clarify some of the “confused and confusing mass of erudition” surrounding the room’s decoration.

The study begins by situating the reader within the cultural and artistic atmosphere of early sixteenth-century Parma. Using a broad range of primary and secondary resources, she reveals the situation into which Correggio arrived to begin the commission and, in so doing, presents a lucid picture of an erudite patroness: the abbess of the convent, Giovanna da Piacenza. Fadda examines ties between the abbess and Alessandro Araldi (who painted her apartments before Correggio arrived), as well as Isabella d’Este, who may have referred Correggio to Giovanna for the project. By placing her focus firmly on the role (and rule) of Giovanna da Piacenza at the Monastery of San Paolo, Fadda highlights the position of this female patron and sheds light on her goals as abbess. Essential to the portrait of Giovanna da Piacenza are Greek and Latin inscriptions that decorate the chamber leading to the *Camera*. As previous scholars have noted, the mottos are anagrams for Giovanna da Piacenza, and Fadda builds on the earlier observation by tying the anagrams to Giovanna’s vision for the convent.

Turning her attention to the *Camera* itself, Fadda pairs the symbolism of Giovanna’s repeatedly displayed family crest with literary, biblical, and mythological sources, which help decipher the room’s imagery. A close examination of each element of the decoration then follows. Fadda expertly ties each feature back to a literary, mythological, or personal source relating to Giovanna and her intentions for the room’s function. By discussing Giovanna’s interests along with the imagery, Fadda explains the complicated program based on visions, dreams, myths, and ideals of the Roman empire, and ultimately determines that the frescoes were designed to educate those in Giovanna’s charge; the images and words were designed to reflect the vows taken by the sisters at the convent and to represent a confirmation of the importance of choosing virtue over vice.

In the *Nepente* chapter, Fadda examines the amusing elements of the decoration, which were designed to banish grief or trouble from the mind. She argues that the comedic elements of the room’s design are part of a mnemonic

device—in which seemingly ridiculous images are used to remember totally unrelated information—meant to aid the nuns’ retention and enjoyment of the room’s overall message. She calls it “a visual scheme that condenses morality and memory” (12).

A standout element of this study is Fadda’s assertion that the frescoes, when considered together with the anagrams, also testify to Giovanna’s intention that the convent remain autonomous and under her control. Indeed, the first half of Fadda’s study is almost a microhistory of the convent under Giovanna’s leadership—in which Correggio plays a secondary, although highly significant, role—making this a serious entry into scholarship on female patronage and power. Fadda concludes her thoughtful examination of the patronage of Giovanna da Piacenza by arguing that most of the commissions Correggio received in Parma were likely facilitated by her family, placing Giovanna at the centre of an influential web of relations.

The flow of narrative also makes this a truly enjoyable read. For example, in one chapter she analyzes the *Camera di San Paolo* from the ground up, drawing connections between multiple influences to demonstrate how the imagery came together. Then, in the final chapter, Fadda provides a narrative analysis of the *Camera* from the point of view of a nun as she enters the room. This approach allows the reader to experience the *Camera di San Paolo* both from the angle of the patroness and her circle of influence, and through the eyes of the target audience. Fadda draws her argument to a close by highlighting a goal of the room’s program: to educate the nuns by reflecting their vows back to them, delighting their senses, and confirming their place in the autonomous convent run by Giovanna da Piacenza.

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