

Attributes of Decorum. Conclusions

[6/6]



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The entry Decorum, illustrated by Giovanni Zarantino Castellini for the 1613 edition of Cesare Ripa's Iconologia, comes to an end here. Compared to the attributes already analyzed (youth, beauty, lion's skin, symbol of Mercury, amaranth flower), the cothurnus and the clog at the feet of the allegory of Decorum are the ones that define it most clearly and definitively. By tracing the history of these two types of footwear in Greco-Roman tradition and highlighting their philosophical, rhetorical, and stylistic correspondences, Castellini constructs a theoretical foundation that few other images in the Western cultural repertoire can claim. The cothurnus as a metaphor for the heroic conception, still steeped in myth, characteristic of tragic theater, and the clog as a metaphor for the popular and bourgeois world from which comedy draws its lifeblood, are the two polarities that sustain Decorum, understood as an instance of dignity and moral strength. Were it not for the fact that the expression "to have a foot in both camps" is notoriously associated with negative connotations, suggesting hypocrisy, duplicity, and opportunism, one might be tempted to invoke it here as well. However, in Castellini's description, there are two feet - the right for the buskin, the left for the clog - and not, as in the proverbial expression just mentioned, just one. In other words, the challenge of Decorum, understood as a compass for invention and imagination, does not lie in cunningly alternating one opinion for another, one style for another, but in always keeping the

whole in mind, and governing its alchemy. This awareness also helps to put into perspective the excesses of literalism and moralistic rigidity, into which Castellini's erudition can sometimes stumble. See C. Ripa, Iconologia, Eredi di Matteo Florimi, Siena 1613, pp. 181–184. The notes to the text are editorial.

As for the meaning of the image: by wearing the severe cothurnus on the right foot, it signifies that the most powerful, noble, & wealthy man, for the sake of his dignity, must wear noble attire befitting his station; by wearing the simple clog on the left foot, it signifies that a man of lesser importance & lowly status must conduct himself properly and not pretend to be a nobleman or a prince, and in deference to decorum, everyone, in dressing, must take into account their age, & rank, always avoiding both extremes: those who, careless of themselves, appear in shabby, dirty, ill-fitting clothes, & those who, on the contrary, dress too formally, taking particular care to clean themselves and appear every day in new, tight-fitting clothes. Cato of Utica passed the bounds of the first: he forgot the decorum of being a Roman Senator, and went to slovenish amongst his friends; with a slight single garment, girded with a rope, & barefooted, as Sabellicus relates in second book [1]. Peditius [2] and Plutarch say that he went walking in the market place, in a peasant's garment; & in this manner, without any other upper garment, he sat in the judgment seat [3]; Sylla was also discommended, that he, being a general, went walking with no decorum through Naples upon pattens, having only a cloak about him. In the other extreme fell Caligula, Nero, and Heliogabulus: Emperors who appeared in gay flowered garments more fitting for a lascivious woman, than an illustrious Emperor; and these two last, never wore any garment more than once, & Pompey is also taken notice of by M. Cicero, *In Atticum*, for wanton and vain; because he wore on his stockings long white garters, with a garment painted with diverse colors, very ill befitting a General, whereat Cicero laughs.

Pompeius togulam illam pictam silentio tuetur suam [4].

Cicero blamed P. Clodius because he wore red stockings which became him not, being a Senator; it agreeing better with a young man who are suffered to wear gay colors, yet they must not, for all that, exceed the bounds of modesty, to trick himself up with curling, patching, embroidery, & ribbons as wanton women do, but they must remember that they are of a much more noble nature. Diogenes, seeing a young man too much given to trick up himself after a womanish fashion, said to him:

Non pudet deterius, quam naturam ipsam, de te ipso statuere? [5]

And as this vanity is discommended in young men, Generals, and Princes; much

more it should be blamed in Philosophers and Doctors, who go not clothed becoming their decorum, also, we must take heed of the slovenliness of Diogenes, Cynicus, & Epaminondas; slutful Philosophers who always wore the same garments, of which sort was Socrates, who went bare footed, with a linnen garment or sack wound about him. Wherein he often, in the street or upon dunghills, went to sleep: with small decorum. We must not only keep decorum not to exceed in clothes, but also in the motion, serving to this end very finely, the cothurni, to express gravity, abhorring those who have too great and formal gravity: holding up their head like a war horse, scarce moving themselves, as if their head were tied to a pole; so that going without decorum, move everyone to laughter that sees them. Also, the clog must not be taken single for ordinary persons in their going as servants & laborers; but that they should wear the clog and the cothurnus together, to allay and qualify their gravity after the ordinary going of grave persons. In Satyre 3, first book, Horatius bites Tigellius Sardus, who kept no measure in his going; who went sometimes softly foot for foot, as if he had been a priest of Juno, & then ran so fast as if his enemies had been at his back.

*Nil equale homini fuit illi, saepe velut qui
Currebat, fugiens hostem: persaepe velut qui
Iunoni sacra ferret* [6].

It is comely in a woman, to go gravely & with slow steps: to cause more decorum, and for this cause, they have more reason to wear high slippers, because they should not go too fast, but for men, it becomes them to go more firmly and with larger steps than women. M. Tullius, as Petrarcha relates, seeing his daughter Tullia, above the gravity of a woman, going too fast; and his son in law Piso, going too slow, not becoming a man, reprehending them both, said to his daughter, in the presence of Piso, *Ambula ut vir* [go but like a man]. Signifying that she should go slower, and he faster, as becomes a man.

Besides all this, the cothurnus & the clog agree very well to the image of decorum, as symbol of poetical decorum; for the poets have in no other manner made a distinction in their poesie, but by the cothurnus & the clog: for as we have said, cothurni were used in tragedies by Princes, Kings, & other noble personages: for all, there were servants and slaves and other ordinary people amongst them. And the comedians used the clog, for their matter was mean of ordinary & private persons. & because there is spoken of ordinary things in a mean style, they took the clog for their mean manner of speaking. And when they treated of kings and Princes, they used a high heroic manner, eyeing the cothurnus, to speak in high language. Ovid.

Altera me sceptro decoras altoque cothurno [8].

Horace in Ars poetica.

Hunc socci coepere pedem grandesque cothurni [9].

Referring to the Comedians and the Tragedians, and in a similar vein, Petrarch speaks of mediocre and sublime talents in that verse.

Materia di coturni e non di socchi [10].

Thus, the buskins and the clogs, understood not in relation to clothing but to speech, are all the more reason to regard them as symbols of poetic decorum, and a summary of each decorum, for the brave Poets observe decorum in their poems, in every respect, in the style of their works, in their language, and in their manner, and strive never to deviate from the propriety due to each character, for if, by mistake, they stray from proper decorum, their characters' imperfections become apparen, as Aristotle notes in his Poetics regarding Ulysses' weeping and lamenting at Scylla, because it was not fitting for Ulysses, as a prudent and wise man, to weep and lament in a base manner. And that is why Aristotle says.

Indecoriatque inconvenienti moris Ulyssis eiulatio in Scylla [11].

Similarly, Cicero criticizes Homer for attributing to the gods actions that would be unworthy even of men such as brawls, anger, discord, envy, & ugly things, and for the same reason, Empedocles & Xenophanes; and it is no surprise that Heraclitus deemed Homer worthy of being banished from the theaters and deserving of being punched and slapped, as Laertius reports.

Homerumque; dicebat dignum qui ex certaminibus eyceretur, colaphisque; cederetur [12].

And for no other reason, but that he did not observe gravity, where otherwise he was a wonder of a high genius and eloquence. According to my mind, Sophocles wants gravity also in his play of Ajax, where he brings in Teucer, the son of a she-slave, the bastard brother of Ajax, to chide with Menelaus, the brother of the emperor Agamemnon, without any reverence or fear, showing him unreverently. And for all it is true, that Menelaus said at parting:

*Abeo, nam turpe auditu fuerit
Verbis cum eo rixari, quem vi coercere possis* [13].

Yet he cleared not himself of the scandal, because he had received many brawling words of Teucer already, especially when he answered him very arrogantly saying:

*Apage te, nam & mihi turpissimum est audire
Hominem stolidum inania verba effutientem* [14].

In these words there is no decorum, neither on the part of King Menelaus in arguing at length with Teucer, a common soldier without rank; nor is it plausible on Teucer's part that he, being of the lowest rank in the Greek army, a mere archer as is evident from Homer and Sophocles himself, and lacking strength, should have had the audacity to oppose a king who was the brother of the Emperor, and were so brazen as to hurl a thousand evil words at him without any respect. And Sophocles shows even less decorum when, shortly thereafter, Teucer proudly retorts to the Emperor himself, boasting of his noble birth, and reproaches Agamemnon for being born of an impious father, & an adulterous mother, and furthermore threatens him, without the proper decorum of a respectful vassal, showing little respect for the Emperor, who, for those insults & threats, could have captured and punished him with his imperial authority, even if Teucer had been prominent and titled rather than a humble subject, as he was. Just as a wise poet strives to endow the characters in his poems with appropriate behavior, taking care not to attribute to them traits that are foreign to decorum, so too must we carefully consider what is fitting for us to do, lest we be criticized for our conduct, unlike those poets who, in introducing characters meant to illustrate human actions, portray them without proper decorum and with little dignity.

[1] Marcantonio Coccio (or Cocci), known as Sabellico (c. 1436–1506), Italian historian and author of *De memorabilibus factis dictisque, exemplorum libri X*.

[2] Quintus Asconius Pedianus (c. 9 BC – c. 76 AC), Roman commentator and grammarian.

[3] Castellini refers to the biography of Cato of Utica found in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.

[4] "Pompey wraps that precious triumphal cloak of his around him in silence". Cicero, *Epistulae ad Atticum*, I,18.

[5] "Are you not ashamed, that you will make yourself more ugly than nature has made you?". The quote, attributed to Diogenes of Sinope, appears in several Renaissance compilations, including the *Repertorium* by the Dalmatian humanist Marko Marulić (1450–1524).

[6] "Nothing about him was ever predictable. He was often in a hurry, as if fleeing from an enemy, and even more often as if he were carrying

offerings to Juno". Horace, *Satires*, I, III, 9-11.

□7□ "Walk like a man". Francesco Petrarca recounts this anecdote in *Rerum memorandarum libri*, II, 39.

□8□ "You adorn me with the scepter and the high cothurnus". Ovid, *Amores*, III,1, 63.

□9□ "This foot comic clog and high cothurni alike adopted". Horace, *Ars poetica*, 80.

□10□ "Matter for cothurni, not for clogs". F. Petrarca, *Triumphs, Triumphus cupidinis*, IV, 88.

□11□ "The incongruous and unbecoming lamentation of Ulysses in Scylla". Aristotle, *Poetics*, 15.

□12□ "Homer deserved to be chased out of the lists and beaten with rods". Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, X,1.

□13□ "I'm leaving. It would be a great disgrace if men found out I've started arguing when I could use my power". Sophocles, *Ajax*.

□14□ "Be off with you! It would be a great disgrace to me to listen to such silly chattering from some fool". Sophocles, *Ajax*.

Homepage: Decorum, graphic elaboration of the plate illustrating Cesare Ripa's book "Iconology", edited by George Richardson, Scott, London 1779. Below: Reproduction of pages 181–184 from Cesare Ripa's book "Iconology", Eredi Matteo Florimi, Siena 1613 (www.archive.org).

sanguinosi casi, sì perche vi s'introducono Imperatori, Rè, Principi, & persone sublimi a' quali conuiene la porpora, & però il coturno è stato assegnato da Poeti, a personaggi grandi, sì come il focco a persone positive, ciuili, & di minor qualità.

La onde per venir al significato de la nostra figura; portando il decoro ne la gamba dritta, il graue coturno, denota che l'huomo più potente, nobile, & ricco per suo decoro deue andare con habito nobile, conueniente ad vn par suo, portando ne la sinistra il semplice focco, denota che l'huomo di minor forza, & di bassa conditione deue andare positiuamente, e non spacciare del nobile, & del Principe, & ciascuno circa l'habito deue hauer risguardo per osseruanza del decoro, à l'età, & al grado, che tiene, fuggendo sempre l'estremo tanto di quelli che sprezzano il culto de la lor persona, i quali non si curano d'esser veduti con abiti vili, lordi, mal legati, quanto di quelli, che se l'allacciano troppo, adoperando particolare studio in pulirsi, & farsi vedere ogni dì con abiti nuovi, & attillati. Catone vticense diede nel primo estremo, che non offeruò punto il decoro da Senator Romano; poiche se n'andaua troppo a la carlona camminando con gli amici in publico scalzato con vna sola veste, di sopra mal cinta con vna cordella, sì come dice M. Antonio Sabellico, lib. secondo, & Asconio Pediano, & Plutarco riferisce, che andaua per il foro cinto in vna toga da campagna, & in tal guisa senz'altra vesta sotto, teneua ragione in tribunale; Silla è anco ripreso, che essendo Imperatore, d'esserciti con poco decoro del suo grado spasseggiaua per Napoli con vn mantello, e in pianelle. Ne l'altro estremo diedero Caligola Nerone, & Heliogabalo Imperatori, liquali compariuano con abiti figurati di varij colori conuenevoli più ad vna lasciuia donna, che ad vn maestevole Imperatore; ne mai gli due vltimi portarono vn vestimento più d'vna volta, & Pompeo Magno ancor esso viene da M. Tullio ad Attico lib. 22. Epist. 3. notato per vano, & lasciuo da le calzette, dalle fascie bianche, & da la vesticciola dipinta, che con poco decoro d'vn supremo capitano par suo portar solea, de la cui vesta, se ne burla ne la 16. Epistola. *Pompeius togulam illam pictam silentio tuetur suam.* Publio Clodio parimente da Cicerone vien biasimato, perche portaua le calzette rosse ch'a lui non si conueniuano, come Senatore, essendo quello colore da giouani, a' quali perche sono in età piu fresca, senz'alcun grado, è lecito portare vestimenti belli, & colori allegri, & vaghi, ma però anch'essi non deueno trapassare i termini della modestia, in pulirsi, assimigliandosi, con ricci, & ciuffi, & abiti troppo lasciui a femine, douendosi ricordare, che sono di natura più nobile. Diogene vedendo vn giouane dedito a simile vanità d'habiti delicati, & abbellimenti femminili, gli disse. *Non pudet deterius, quam naturam ipsam, de te ipso statuere?* Se questa vanità d'habiti, vien ripresa in giouani, in Capitani, & Principi, tanto più anco saranno ripresi i Filosofi, & Dottori, che con habito conforme al decoro de la sapienza.