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Marginalia to Vasari

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Giorgio Vasari's rôle as the 'Father of Art History' has never been doubted by anyone interested in and concerned with the historical development of this field of humanistic studies. His accomplishments as biographer nevertheless overshadowed his achievements as painter and architect. Even after scholars turned their attention to Vasari the painter and draughtsman, the initial impression remains that he was more an *uomo delle lettere* than an *uomo del penello*. Yet even his literary reputation did not remain unchallenged. After centuries of firm belief in the statements and descriptions in Vasari's *Vite*,¹ a critical attitude began to prevail, an attitude marked by an eagerness to point out inconsistencies and mistakes and, ultimately, to doubt Vasari's reliability altogether. Little is gained by such attitudes, as the first one amounts to an uncritical reading, while the other avoids answering the question whether 'errors' can be explained – as, for instance, through references to literary or visual sources upon which Vasari based his descriptions. While a familiarity with those references may not help to correct mistakes, it can provide insights into Vasari's method. Such knowledge, in turn, is the key to the understanding and correct reading of Vasari's biographies.

Wolfgang Kallab's outstanding research into the literary sources used and exploited by Vasari still constitutes our most valuable and reliable source of information.² Kallab had also intended to add to his investigations a chapter on the visual sources employed by Vasari. At the moment of Kallab's untimely death, this section still remained in such a sketchy form that Julius von Schlosser, the editor of Kallab's manuscript, did not include it in the publication that he prepared. The following observations are put forward to show that it would be a worthwhile effort to

follow Kallab's lead by studying in a systematic way the visual sources that Vasari used when writing the *Vite*.

Not unlike the modern art historian who, in his research, often depends (and at times must depend) on photographs rather than on the object of his investigation itself, Vasari based many of his observations on engravings. In some instances, he refers to a specific print or set of prints and provides the name of the designer and/or engraver; in others, similar references and/or identifications are missing, most likely because the print or set of prints used was unsigned. This observation in itself is already indicative of the function which prints had for Vasari. After all, why would Vasari mention the existence of the engraving unless he wanted to provide the reader with information on where to obtain this print? Access to a given print (as substitute for the original) would make it possible for the reader to familiarize himself with an artist's style and handling of a scene. Thus the value of the print must have been seen by Vasari more in what it told about the artist than what it recorded of the object itself. Vasari may well have been aware of the fact that some of the prints on which his text relied were not really correct renderings of the objects they depicted. Yet the main objective of the *Vite* was biographical. Since it was not conceived as catalogue raisonné (which would have required a critical evaluation of the print), discrepancies did not really matter and did not need to be pointed out. As most of the descriptions based on prints appear in the second edition of the *Vite*, in which Vasari published

¹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* (Florence, 1550; 2nd ed., Florence, 1568).

² Wolfgang Kallab, *Vasaristudien* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1908).



FIGURE 1. Giovanni Battista Franco, Scenes from the *Sala di Psiche* in the Palazzo del Te in Mantua (Bartsch xvi, 133, 47).

woodcuts of portraits of each artist,³ one is inclined to ask whether the frequent references to prints may have been suggestions to the reader to create an illustrated version of the *Vite*. A collection of prints could accordingly have been considered as an acceptable substitute for drawings as means to document an artist's style. It should not be forgotten that Vasari himself collected drawings, which he mounted on large sheets with appropriate ornamentation to document the *maniera* of each artist.⁴ A set of prints would fulfil the same function, at least in principle. Thus we may conclude that Vasari is asking the reader to look at the print while reading the *Vite*. As long as this junction were maintained, no question with regard to Vasari's reliability could be raised. Only if one overlooks Vasari's intention by replacing the combination of print and text with a comparison of the text and the actual object (i.e. when, instead of considering the print as an illustration of the artist's style, it is conceived as a correct description of the object itself), can one come to question Vasari's reliability. However, such a verdict is based on an assumption different from the one which guided Vasari when he wrote the *Vite*.

After the publication of the first edition of the *Vite*, Vasari received criticism and corrections which caused the partial rewriting of the original text. Such rewriting amounted in most instances to an elaboration of previously sketchy descriptions. Two examples can demonstrate this point. In 1550, the description of the *Sala di Psiche* in the Palazzo del Te in Mantua was limited to two observations which may well have been a recollection of Vasari's visit to Mantua in 1542: namely the exquisite handling of foreshortening in the ceiling paintings and the rendering of the *credenza*, fauns, and satyrs on the south wall of the room. In 1568, while elaborating on the previously mentioned effects of the ceiling paintings, he replaced the short reference to the *credenza* and the figures near it with a long and detailed text rendering of scenes on the south, west, and parts of the north wall. This description follows exactly a print whose designer Vasari identified as Battista Franco Vinziano, i.e. Giovanni Battista Franco (Fig. 1).⁵ This print shows the scenes in reverse and, in addition, a figure of Apollo which does not appear in Giulio Romano's painting.

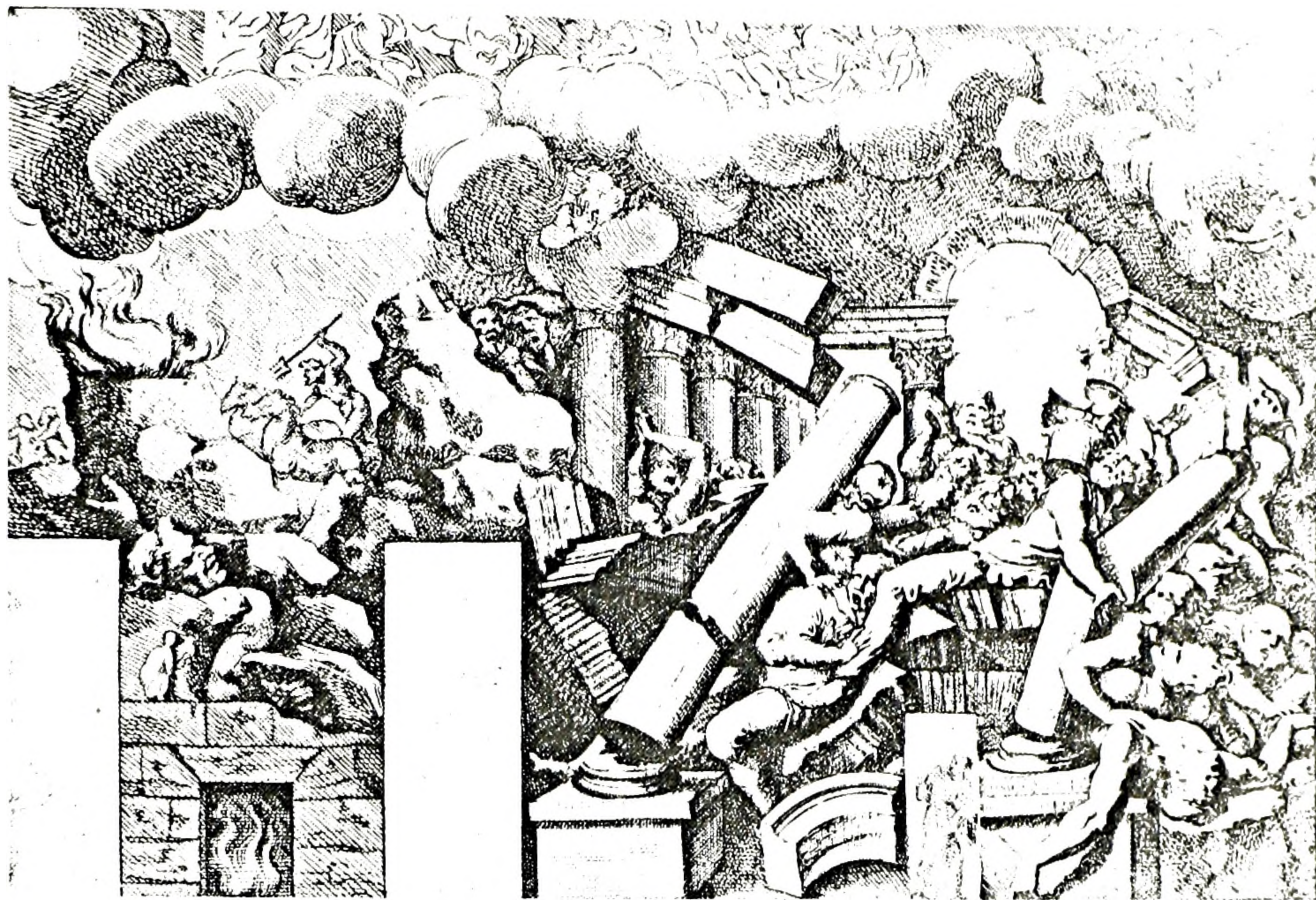
A comparable transformation occurred with regard to Vasari's description of the *Sala dei Giganti* in the same palace. In 1550 it was fairly brief and unspecific. (Whether it was based on his own notes or recollections, or upon a written report received from Mantua after Giulio Romano's death in 1546, cannot be determined and does not matter here.) What is significant is that the narrative does not follow any order. Various gods appearing on the ceiling are

³ See Wolfram Prinz, 'Vasaris Sammlung von Künstlerbildnissen,' *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, xii (1966), Beiheft.

⁴ See Licia Ragghianti-Collobi, *Il libro de' disegni del Vasari* (Florence, 1974).

⁵ Bartsch xvi, 133, 47. The print consists of two parts. In my *The Palazzo del Te in Mantua* (Baltimore and London, 1977 [reviewed on p. 79]), 118, this print was wrongly referred to as Bartsch xvi, 133, 41.

FIGURE 2. Unknown engraver, Scenes from the north and east walls of the Palazzo del Te in Mantua (Milton S. Eisenhower Library, the Johns Hopkins University).



named, but they do not appear on the ceiling in the sequence suggested by Vasari. Comparable summarizing statements were made by him with regard to the walls. In 1568, however, the scenes on the ceiling were described accurately. Comparing the text with the painting, one becomes aware of the fact that Vasari's narrative – which begins with Jupiter and the figures at his sides – continues towards the left, whereas his descriptions usually proceeded towards the right. One may suspect that a print or set of prints rendering the scenes in reverse has yet again provided the basis for Vasari's description.

There exists a series of such prints, unsigned, undated, and unattributed, which must have been available to Vasari. Arranged properly, the individual prints allowed Vasari to read the ceiling paintings from right to left as he had done in the case of Giovanni Battista Franco's rendering of the *Sala di Psiche*. Inasmuch as the set of prints also included the depiction of the walls, Vasari was now in a position to be more specific here, too. While he mentions scenes from all four walls, he refers to only two locations in the room, implying that only two walls were painted with scenes. However, the combination of scenes taken from the east and north walls and the south and west walls respectively, corresponds to the design of the prints (Fig. 2) that render two walls on one sheet each. There can then be little doubt that this series of prints was executed before 1568.⁶ Surely, they are no masterpieces, but in addition to providing us with the source Vasari used and confirming the function that prints had for him

when writing the *Vite*, they also document another feature: namely, that artists may in their turn have been influenced by Vasari's text, causing them to add 'explanatory' figures much as one would add a footnote to a text. In the doorway beneath the collapsing temple a frightened figure appears, suggesting a visitor who may be entering the room. In Vasari's first description of the room, such a visitor is implied in precisely the same location and expressing fear that the collapsing temple may destroy not only the giants, but himself as well.

A final argument can be presented to buttress the suggestion that references to identifiable prints were made to aid the reader in compiling a volume of illustrations. In 1575, Diana Scultori⁷ published in Rome an engraving showing the interior of the *Sala di Psiche* (Fig. 3).⁸ Although obviously based on Giovanni Battista Franco's earlier print, it is not without essential changes. The most important among these are the elimination of those figures (like the Apollo) which do

6 The print illustrated in Fig. 2 has recently been reproduced in Bodo Guthmüller, 'Ovidübersetzungen und mythologische Malerei,' *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XXI (1977), 55, where it was attributed to Pietro Santi Bartoli. The high quality of Bartoli's engravings of the *Sala degli Stucchi* speaks in my view against an attribution of the prints from the *Sala dei Giganti* to Bartoli.

7 A most unsatisfactory and incomplete discussion of Diana Scultori was recently published and must be used with greatest caution: Gioconda Albricci, 'Prints by Diana Scultori,' *Print Collector*, no. 12 (1975), 17-23.

8 Bartsch xv, 449, 40. Although the print (which consists of three parts) is dated 1575, Bartsch claimed that Vasari's description of the *Sala di Psiche* is based on this engraving.

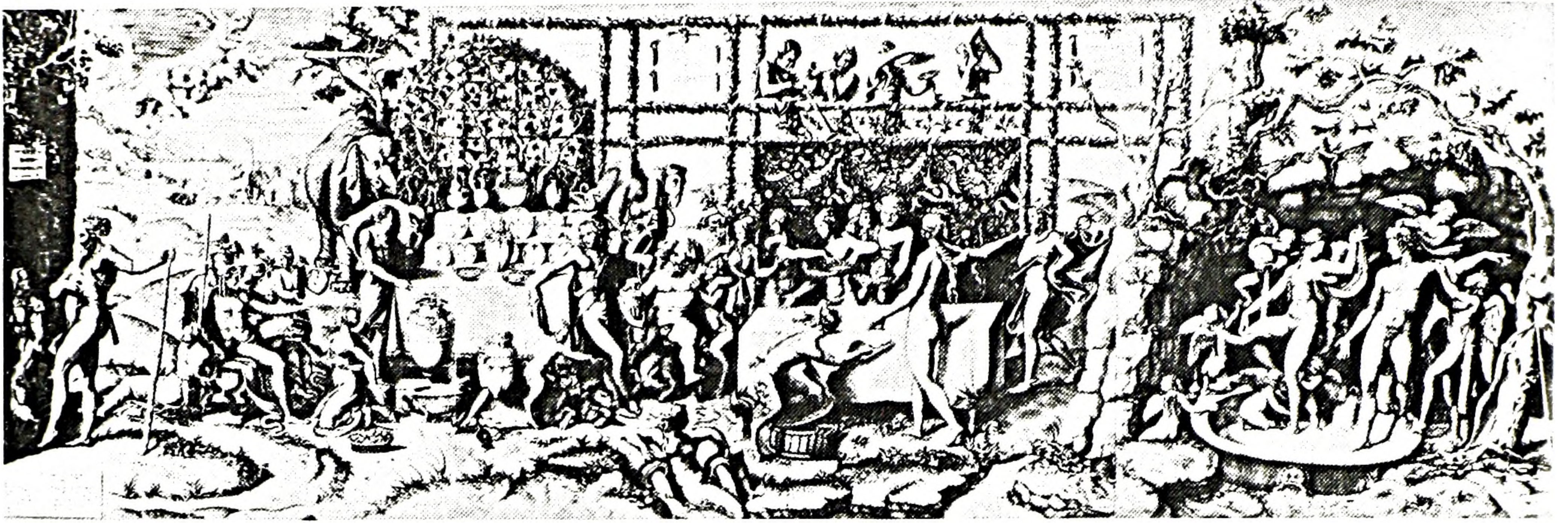


FIGURE 3. Diana Scultori, Scenes from the *Sala di Psiche* in the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, 1575 (Bartsch xv, 449, 40).

not appear in Giulio Romano's painting, and the reversal of the print so that the scenes appear in the proper sequence. Perhaps we should consider Diana Scultori's revision of Giovanni Battista Franco's rendering of the room in just the same way in which Vasari's second edition of the *Vite*

⁹ It would be worthwhile to determine precisely how many corrected descriptions in Vasari's second edition of the *Vite* are based on prints, and whether there is a perceptible increase of engravings that show entire scenes, rather than individual figures, after 1550. It was not the purpose of this note to present a final tabulation, but only to show that much research still needs to be undertaken with regard to Vasari.

corrected and superseded the first one. The goal of her activity could then be described as the 'improvement' of the illustrations to Vasari's text. To provide a more careful and/or trustworthy rendering of a scene or figure must have been the ultimate goal in this and other instances where a previously engraved scene was redone.⁹

It is important to note that the correction concerned only the print, and not Vasari's text. Like Giovanni Battista Franco, Diana Scultori does not give a correct and total rendering of the *Sala di Psiche*; thereby she accepts as a valid criterion Vasari's use of and reference to engravings as part of his biographies.