

Attributes of Decorum. Amaranth



by Cesare Ripa, Giovanni Zaratino Castellini

Amaranth is the fifth attribute assigned to the allegory of Decorum by Giovanni Zaratino Castellini in the entry he wrote for Cesare Ripa's Iconologia. The description focuses mainly on the values of permanence and eternity that the amaranth flower represents in the classical tradition. Values that Castellini proposes as an antidote, not so much to the joys, sorrows and passions that we may encounter along the way, but to the excesses, sometimes of submission, sometimes of indifference, with which men often approach them, are overwhelmed by them or avoid them. See C. Ripa, Iconologia, Eredi di Matteo Florimi, Siena 1613, pp. 174-176.

The Amaranth, which he holds in his left hand, is a flower which is always in bloom, and which retains its beauty. It was with this flower that the Greeks of Thessaly adorned the tomb of Achilles, which was their only beauty, to show that, like this flower, the name of Achilles does not fade but, as Antonio Telesio says in his book *De Coronis*, remains eternal: *Thessali Achillis sui monumentum Amarantho coronabant, ut ostenderent quemadmodum flos ille numquam interit, sic eius famam perpetuo duraturam* [1]. It is called Amaranth because it never dies. When, in hard and stormy winters, it is not easy to get them, they sprinkle the old dry flowers with water; by this they regain their former strength and beauty, so that in the middle of winter they make garlands of them, as Plinius says in book 20, ch. 8 [2]. So, too, may a man who has fallen into the hard and impetuous misfortunes of this unstable world, and whose spirits have failed him, revive himself with the water of

appreciation. That is to say, he can think about what he has to do in such a case, and then he revives in a more flourishing state of mind than before, and prepares for himself a garland of fame and honour in these difficult times. And all this he does with decorum. And therefore he is crowned and adorned with the amaranth, which has these letters about the flowers, *Sic Floret Decoro Decus* [3]. Means that honour always flourishes through decorum, like the amaranth: for man makes himself strong through decorum & always preserves his dignity: he who lives with decorum in good & happy times does not become haughty, in bad & unhappy times he does not lose heart vilely. *Dum secunda fortuna arridet superbire noli, adversa perstrepenste noli*, as the philosopher Cleobulus said [4]: when good fortune favours you, be not arrogant; when bad fortune rages, be not despondent: and this we cannot do unless we have before our eyes that estimation which makes a man strong, & magnanimous: like Scipio Africanus, who never became haughty when fortune was in his favour, nor lost heart when it was against him, and it is not surprising that Minos, in a dialogue by Lucian of Samosata, places this honourable & generous Roman Captain as a good judge above Alexander the Great & Hannibal the Carthaginian, not so much for his valour as for the decency of his good & honourable manners, before Alexander the Great & Hannibal the Carthaginian, very haughty, arrogant, wrathful, inconstant & unhonourable Captains, devoid of true decorum & magnanimity [5]. This is what M. Tullius meant in his *Officia*; *Omnino fortis animus, et magnus duabus rebus maxime cernitur, quarum una in rerum externarum despicientia ponitur cum persuasum sit nihil hominem nisi, quod Honestum decorumque; sit, aut ad mirari, aut optare; aut expetere oportere, nullique neque homini neque perturbationi animi, nec fortuna succumbere* [6]. From this it follows that he who is truly a man likes only what is honourable in accordance with decorum & for this reason, being of a great & strong mind, he does not subject himself to contrarieties & strokes of fortune. That is why Tullius goes on to warn, in his discussion of propriety, that in favourable things & in all events that happen according to our will, haughtiness & arrogance should be avoided, since excessive behaviour, in unfavourable as well as favourable circumstances, is a sign of levity & lack of decorum, since decorum implies honesty, temperance, modesty & moderation in difficulties: I say moderation, because a man may certainly, without blame, be troubled, but moderately, because however much his mind may at times be moved by some movement & disturbance of the mind, he does not thereby lose the decorum due to a wise man. *Sapiens non omnino perturbationibus vacat, verum perturbatur modice*, says Aristotle in Laertius [7]. To mourn & to rejoice is indeed typical of man; not to mourn & not to rejoice is a thing worthy of a piece of wood or a stone. *Non dolere stipitis est, non hominis* [8], said Saint Augustine in *De Civitate Dei*, book 4, chapter 9. & Pliny the Younger, in his *Epistulae*, book 8, writes to Paterno, saddened by the death of his sons, that he considers neither great nor wise those who, taking little account of such cases, think themselves wise & great, indeed he does not consider them to be men at all,

& says; *Qui an magni sapientesque sint nescio, homines non sunt, hominis est enim affici dolore, sentire, resistere tamen, & solatia admittere, non solatijs non egere* [9]. Therefore it is human to give room to sorrow & joy, & the severity of Socrates, who never showed any sign of sorrow or joy, or the severity of Anaxagoras & Aristoxenes, who never laughed, should not restrain us, because they went beyond what was necessary: he who does not mourn or rejoice at all, or rejoices too much, like the perpetual laughter of Democritus & the perpetual weeping of Heraclitus, is equally worthy of blame, all excess is wrong, propriety shows us the middle way & shows us what is proper, honourable & expedient; it is expedient that in the public & private affairs of relatives, patrons & friends we feel joy, sadness, pleasure or sorrow according to the daily occurrence & that we make it an occasion of rejoicing or mourning: but, as we have said, with the affections of the mind we must be merry with tempered honesty, which becomes decorum. & thus, in a vigorous mind, we shall see it always flourish like the Amaranth.

[1] «The Thessalians crowned the tomb of Achilles with amaranth, to show that, as the flower does not wither, so his fame was destined to last for ever». A. Telesius, *De Coronis*, Francesco Minizio Calvo, Rome 1525 [ed.].

[2] Castellini refers to Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, where the exact place is not XX, 8 but XXI, 23 [ed.].

[3] *Sic Floret Decoro Decus*: «Thus beauty shines through decorum». This latin motto, coined by Castellini, is consecrated in the Sansevero Chapel in Naples, renovated in the mid-18th century for Prince Raimondo di Sangro, a great admirer of *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa, and precisely in the statue of *Decorum*, sculpted by Antonio Corradini in 1750-51, where it appears in the column on which the allegorical figure leans [ed.].

[4] «Do not be arrogant when good fortune comes your way, do not be discouraged when bad fortune strikes you with violence». Castellini quotes from the *Life of Cleobulus* in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, I. Cleobulus of Lindos (6th century BC) is remembered as one of the Seven Sages of ancient Greece [ed.].

[5] Castellini refers to the dialogue between Alexander, Hannibal, Minos and Scipio, included in the *Dialogues of the Dead* by Lucian of Samosata [ed.].

[6] «A magnanimous man is known especially in two things: whereof one is said to be in dispising of outward things, by which it appears, that a man must not wish nor desire, but what is honest and decent; and, that no man, neither by perturbation of mind nor fortune, must suffer himself to be

brought down and overpowered». Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, book I, 66 [ed.].

□7□ «The wise man is by no means insensitive, if anything he is sensitive to the right degree». Castellini is quoting from the *Life of Aristotle* in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, V [ed.].

□8□ «Feeling no pain suits a piece of wood, not a man» [ed.].

□9□ «I know not whether they be wise, but they are no men; for it is human-like to mourn and feel sadness, and to resist against it, and suffer ourselves to be comforted, having need of consolation». Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, *Epistulae*, book VIII, 16 [ed.].

Homepage: "Decoro", graphic elaboration of the table illustrating Cesare Ripa's "Iconologia", Tomasini, Venice 1645.

Below: reproduction of pages 174-176 from Cesare Ripa's "Iconologia", Eredi di Matteo Florimi, Siena 1613. (www.archive.org).

scuna cosa vogliono interponere il giuditio loro, i quali poi nel parlare si danno a conoicere per ignoanti con poco lor decoro, come il Principe Megabizo, che volle tassare alcune figure in casa di Zeuxide, & discorrere con gli scolari suoi, dell'arte del dipingere, a cui Zeuxide disse questi giouani mentre taceui ti ammirauano come Principe ornato di porpora, hora si ridono di te, che vuoi ragionare d'vna professione, che non fai: di più offeruerassi principalmente il decoro nel parlare se dando bando a parole brutte, & dishoneste, si ragionerà di cose honeste, & honorate, il che si cōuiene massimamente a' giouani di bello aspetto, perche alla bellezza loro del corpo deue corrispondere la bellezza dell'animo, che si manifesta da vn parlare di cose honeste. Vedendo Diogene filosofo vn giouane bello, che parlaua senza decoro, dissegli nō ti vergogni tū di cauar da vna bella guaina d'auorio, vn coltello di piōbo? pigliando la guaina d'auorio, per la bellezza del corpo, & il coltello di piōbo, per lo parlare di cosa brutta, vile, & infima, come il piombo tra metalli, veggasi Laertio nella vita di Diogene. oue dice. *Videns decorum adolescentem indecorè loquentem, non erubescis ait ex eburnea vagina plumbeum educens gladium?* L'Amaranto, che nella sinistra mano porta, è fiore che d'ogni tempo fiorisce, & mantiene il suo decoro della bellezza, con questo i Greci in Tessaglia incoronauano il Colero d'Achille vnica lode.

decoro, per dimostrare, che si come quel fiore mai perisce, così la sua fama faria per sempre durare, si come dice Antonio Thilesio, nel suo trattato delle corone. *Thessali Achillis sui monumentum Amarantho coronabant, vt ostenderent quemadmodum flos ille nunquam interit, sic eius fama perpetuo duraturam.* E detto Amaranto perche mai marcesce, & se ne i tempi aspri del turbolento inuerno alquanto viene mancando, rinfrescato con l'acqua baldanzoso torna nel primiero stato, & vigore tanto, che di lui se ne può far corona, ancor d'inuerno, si come dice Plinio lib. 20. cap. 8. così l'huomo se da gli aspri, e turbolenti casi di questo instabil Mondo offeso viene a mancar d'animo, rinfrescatosi con l'acqua del decoro, cioè riducendosi ne la mente quello, che si conuiene fare in tali accidenti risorge nel fiorito stato d'animo di prima, & fa corone di lode, & di honori ne torbidi tempi a se stesso, mediante il decoro, però va incoronato, & ricamato d'Amaranto, & tiene il motto intorno al fiore, che dice. *Sic Floret DECORO DECVS* Cioè che l'honore per il decoro fiorisce d'ogni tempo, come l'Amaranto: perche l'huomo si rende forte mediante il decoro, & si mantiene condeceamente in ogni tempo: chi vi ue con decoro ne i tempi buoni, & felici, non si insuperbisce, ne li cattivi, & infelici non si perdè vilmente d'animo. *Dum secunda fortuna arridet superbire noli, aduersa perfirepente noli frangi* Disse Cleobolo Filosofo, mentre la prospera fortuna ti fauorisce non ti volere insuperbire, facendo fracasso la peruersa fortuna, non ti volere sbigottire, e rompere: ma ciò non può volere chi si gouerna senza decoro, che fa l'huomo forte, & magnanimo: come Scipione Africano, il quale mai s'insuperbi ancorche vittorioso per la prosperità della fortuna, ne per l'auerla si perdè d'animo, ne