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A Greek Mystery at Biltmore Estate: Identifying the "Heroic Female Figures" of the Library Fireplace

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to conclusively identify the "two heroic female figure" sculptures on the library fireplace at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina as either Hestia and Demeter, Aeternitas and Eve, or Urania and Hygieia through the use of visual and textual comparisons. Prior to this exploration, there has been no thorough investigation of these sculptures or their significance to each other and their context, either from scholars or the internal research team of the estate. This missing informational gap stems from a lack of firsthand identification by both the head architect, Richard Morris Hunt, who drafted designs for the entirety of sculpture used in the home, and the sculptor, Karl Bitter. Although there are no primary acknowledgements of these two figures, this research paper hopes to draw connections between the two figures and the larger library as a location for the acquisition of knowledge. It will thoroughly delve into the historical context of these artworks, as well as provide in-depth descriptions of each pairing, utilizing site specific research on the Biltmore Estate through firsthand analysis of the sculptures; comparing them to Classical depictions to confirm or disprove these identifications. The works of Victoria Volk, John Bryan, Mike Dixon-Kennedy, John M. Steadman, Warwick Wroth, David Daube, and H. B. Walters and their descriptions of these figures will be examined to understand the allegorical relationships between these women and their location by discussing their Classical significance, their relevance in Victorian era America, and their function in the Biltmore library.

Keywords: Biltmore Estate, Biltmore, library, mantel, female figures, Urania, Hygieia, Hestia, Demeter, Aeternitas, Eve, nineteenth century, 19th century, George Vanderbilt, Karl Bitter, Richard Morris Hunt, Victorian, identification, French Renaissance, wisdom, astronomy, science, medicine, Iliad, Odyssey

1. Introduction

The Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina contains a number of Greco-Roman motifs in its architecture, furniture, and sculpture. These include the depictions of cherubs on mirrors, chairs, and bedposts in honor of Venus and the use of acanthus leaves around reliefs of the Vanderbilt family crest. The expansive use of both subtle and explicit references to the ancient iconography indicate George Vanderbilt's knowledge of Classical artwork, as well as his attention to detail in every aspect of his home. This is especially true of the library, one of the estate's most highly decorated rooms, and one of Vanderbilt's favorite spaces. Of particular interest here is the fireplace. Most of the imagery depicted on the fireplace has been identified and analyzed. Examples include the sculptures of Venus and Vulcan on the andirons and the Aubusson tapestry depicting the Banquet of Alcinous from the seventeenth century.[1] There are two motifs, however, that remain a mystery: the two wooden sculptures of female figures placed on either side of the tapestry. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Karl Bitter, Richard Morris Hunt, and George Vanderbilt, *Heroic Figures Carved in Walnut for Library Mantel*, 1895-96, French Walnut, The Biltmore Estate, Asheville, Photograph by author.

Neither the sculptor, Karl Bitter, nor the head architect, Richard Morris Hunt, gave any indication in their writing or sketches as to what these figures represent. As there are no firsthand accounts, they have been analyzed as arbitrary references to the Greco-Roman period, rather than having a specific iconography. Prior to this attempt, there has been no in-depth exploration of the figures, nor have there been any conclusive identifications. Yet, considering George Vanderbilt's interest in literature and knowledge, Richard Morris Hunt's attention to detail throughout the rest of the house, and the inherent narrative quality of Greco-Roman sculpture, it seems unlikely that these two figures simply showcase references to a fashionable style. In fact, there are three options of identification for each sculpture that should be explored: Victoria Volk's assumption of the figures as Hestia and Demeter, and my own explorations of the figures as either *Aeternitas* and Eve, or *Urania* and *Hygieia*.[2]

2. The Library and Its Creators

Construction on the Biltmore Estate began in October of 1889, with the intent to complete it by Christmas of 1895.[3] Instead, most of the time spent on the home was dedicated to erecting the massive foundation and exterior walls. Interior construction and decoration would not begin until late 1894.[4] Although George Vanderbilt decided to officially open the house to friends and family on Christmas of 1895 as originally planned, it was not until later that much of the interior — such as the servants' quarters, George Vanderbilt's bedroom, and the library — was completed.[5] One of the main features of the library missing at the estate's opening were the two "heroic" female characters that are now present on the second story of the fireplace mantel. The two sculptures were completed on time in 1895, but delivered and integrated in 1896 after the wooden paneling was installed.[6] Regardless, as one of the intended entertainment spaces, it is possible that the completion of the library became more crucial for both patron and artist as the deadline to open approached. This hastiness to finish might be why these women were not identified.

Once completed, the library became a key space of entertainment for the Vanderbilt family. An avid reader, George Vanderbilt is said to have spent most of his time in the library and encouraged his house guests to do the same.[7] He purposefully instructed that the flutes for this hearth be diverted to construct a hidden hallway behind the top half of the fireplace.[8] This hallway led to guest rooms, allowing visitors access to the library at their leisure. Furthermore, it was common for Mr. Vanderbilt to read to his companions here after dinner as a form of entertainment.[9] Surely, for both the purposes of self-indulgence in decorating his favorite space and impressing his guests, Mr. Vanderbilt viewed the library as a significant room that warranted special iconographic attention. Such detail was entrusted to Richard Morris Hunt.

Hunt, a famous American architect, was in charge of designing and overseeing the construction of the entirety of the Biltmore home until the few months before his death in 1895.[10] Having studied Beaux-Arts in Paris, Hunt developed a French Renaissance aesthetic.[11] On his return to the United States, and his subsequent employment as head architect at the Biltmore, Hunt would reference this design and define the American architectural industry of the time.[12] Much like the overarching themes of the Renaissance, the French Renaissance sourced Greco-Roman art and philosophy as a benchmark for success and mastery of subjects. Sticking to this template, Hunt would construct the

vast majority of the estate's art and architecture on Greek sculpture and French Renaissance facades, while adding a contemporary touch to select designs in order to fit a more modern aesthetic.[13]

Working alongside Hunt on the vast majority of sculptural work at the Biltmore was Austrian sculptor, Karl Bitter.[14] A student from the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Bitter's artwork similarly drew on the influence of the Beaux-Arts, but his pieces took on a more Baroque interpretation.[15] As with the French Renaissance, Baroque artwork referenced Greco-Roman classicism. However, rather than the overwhelming reference of pagan themes, Baroque art more often highlighted biblical narratives in context of the Counter Reformation. Immigrating to the United States in 1884, and working from his studio in New York, Bitter became a popular monumental sculptor under the guidance of Hunt.[16] It is because of this prior relationship that Hunt decided to hire Bitter to create most of the large scale sculpture at the estate, including the two library mantel pieces.[17] Working together, the two artists would form a dynamic relationship in which Hunt would conceptualize and Bitter would deliver.

Despite Karl Bitter's status as head sculptor, his artistic license was limited by Hunt.[18] Bitter did have some freedom in immediate visual choices (such as the draping of cloth on the body), but most content of sculpture was given to him by Hunt to execute. As John Bryan notes, "Bitter was essentially a subcontractor under the supervision of the Hunt office, an arrangement typical of the way Hunt handled a great deal of interior design work."[19] Hunt was more concerned in fulfilling the wants and needs of his clients versus the artistic individuality of his team and had drawn extensive plans of the house based on Vanderbilt's interests and requests.[20] This is something that Karl Bitter complained about on occasion in his writing, although he continued to follows Hunt's templates and formed a jovial bond with the architect.[21]

An example of Hunt's control of ideas can be seen in his sketches of the library fireplace from 1893.[22] (Figure 2)

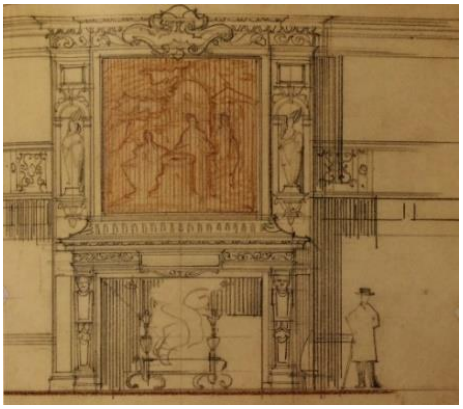

Figure 2. Richard Morris Hunt, *Biltmore, Study for the Library Fireplace*, April 17, 1893, The Museum of the American Architectural Foundation, Washington, D.C. Photograph from Bryan, *The Biltmore Estate*.

This sketch defines the overall layout of the mantel, dividing it into two stories, distinguished by color in order to describe a difference in material. The rendering includes a loose outline of the tapestry that dominates the center of the second story, the two figures on either side of this tapestry, and two andirons. Granted, the two heroic figures are shown here as vague and ambiguous. Still, so were the andirons which were later sketched by Hunt's son, Richard Howland Hunt. (Figure 3)

Figure 3. Richard Howland Hunt, *Biltmore, Sketch for Library Andirons in Polished Iron or Steel*, February 5, 1896, The Museum of the American Architectural Foundation, Washington, D.C. Photograph from Bryan, *The Biltmore Estate*.

Rather than lack of detail, it is more likely that these plans for the figures were later solidified between Mr. Vanderbilt and Karl Bitter, when Hunt was no longer able to work on the project.

As Richard Morris Hunt was approaching the end of his life, he would hand off his business to his son. During this transition, and for reasons of personal interest, George Vanderbilt would take more authority in discussing the designs of artworks with Bitter. Evidence of such collaboration includes the banquet hall, in which Vanderbilt designed a space that thematically encompassed the marital struggles between Venus and Vulcan as a metaphor for Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*.[23] A continuation of theme is evident in the library's fireplace andirons, which likewise depict Venus and Vulcan.[24] This suggests that Vanderbilt had just as much authority on the artwork as in the library. His influence would have been much like Hunt's — where Vanderbilt was the creator of these ideas, and Karl Bitter simply served as his "hands". With this in mind, it becomes evident that there is a standard of detailed narrative throughout the house which I suggest continues within these library sculptures.

3. The Two Heroic Figures of the Library Fireplace Mantel

Divided into two stories, the library fireplace is differentiated by material – marble on the first story and French walnut on the second. This upper walnut level uses the same material as the paneling that covers the walls of the rest of the library. Labeled as the "two heroic female figures", the two sculptures in question are part of this upper story and are also carved of walnut. They are placed on pedestals on either side of the large tapestry that sits in the center of the mantel's vertical axis. By juxtaposing the figures on either side of this implied line, there is an inherent symmetry. The poses accentuate this, as each figure faces away from the textile and into the space. Furthermore, both figures wear the same attire, depict the full body in a contrapposto pose, share a similar sense of weight, and are of the same scale at around eight feet in height. This mirroring of formal aesthetic choices suggests a thematic relationship between the two sculptures.

Although overwhelmingly similar, the two women deserve individual analysis, as their formal qualities vary slightly, and the items they hold in their arms are vastly different. The body of the woman on the left conforms to a straight line from her head, through her body, and into her left leg, onto which she shifts her weight. Her right leg displays relaxed muscles as it bends and crosses in front of her body. Her right foot settles gently next to the left. In contrast to the legs, the woman's left arm hangs limp, while her right limb and hand display tensed muscles as she grasps an orb. This sphere is an abstraction of a globe—blank except for a single carved dentation that surrounds the sphere on an equatorial line. The figure looks down upon this globe with lidded eyes and a relaxed set of her jaw. Finally, she wears a *peplos*, a type of tunic worn by Greek women which was made from a large piece of woolen, rectangular fabric and was pinned together when worn. (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Karl Bitter, *Heroic Figure Carved in Walnut for Library Mantel*, 1895-96, French Walnut, The Biltmore Estate, Asheville, Photograph by author.

Much like her partner, the woman on the right wears a *peplos* that seductively clings to her body in the popular Greek "wet drapery" style and gazes down gently upon the objects that she holds in her hands. (Figure 5)

Figure 5. Karl Bitter, *Heroic Figure Carved in Walnut for Library Mantel*, 1895-96, French Walnut, The Biltmore Estate, Asheville, Photograph by author.

However, in contrast to her counterpart, this character holds objects in both arms rather than one. In her left hand, the figure holds a shallow bowl, and in her right she holds the upper body of a snake. While she is holding the snake in a tight grip, the serpent "grabs" her back as its body wraps around her arm. The snake's mouth is open as it slithers towards the shallow bowl to feed. With such specific props and poses, these women must have some sort of thematic or allegorical significance. Based on research and observation, three options are possible, the first of which has been put forth by Victoria Volk.

4. Goddess of the Hearth and Goddess of the Earth

In her doctoral dissertation on the Biltmore Estate and its creators, philosopher Victoria Volk presents the first theory of interpretation for these figures. She writes:

> To either side of the tapestry are two female mythological figures. Hestia, goddess of the hearth, is placed to the left, and Demeter, goddess of the earth, is to the right. The goddesses are both placed on pedestals above the mantel, and are facing away from the tapestry. They each stand on foot, their garments swirling around their bodies. Hestia is holding an orb, and Demeter toys with the snake wrapped around her arm.[25]

As stated by Volk, Hestia is the Greek goddess of the hearth, patroness of the household, and is often credited with building home.[26] She was depicted over the civic fireplace of every city in ancient Greece, which was the primary political center of the community. Since hearths were essential to all homes, it was seen as a symbol of every man, and so a metaphor for the creation of a democratic space.[27] As this marker of democracy, Hestia was often regarded as a figure that represented stability and centrality. Dr. Jean-Joseph Goux argues that this classification draws parallels to the earth as her Roman representation, Vesta, is described with such associations.[28] This would be significant in confirming the library figure as Hestia, since the statue holds a globe. Unfortunately, this comparison of figures is also the argument's downfall.

Goux uses the names Hestia and Vesta interchangeably to describe a singular figure, rather than addressing them as two separate entities. Although equivalent in many ways, this connection between Hestia and Vesta is not appropriate. Most of the Roman pantheon is in some way inspired by Greece, particularly the twelve Olympians. But, these were often modified to meet Roman needs. An example of this is *Hygieia*, goddess of physical health, who later evolves into Salus, the goddess of safety and well-being.[29] In the same fashion, Hestia evolved into Vesta, who represented the earth, but did not originally reflect this correlation. The Greek Hestia was not equated to the earth either in textual or visual references. In fact, Hestia is never officially depicted in ancient Greek art. Due to her chosen sacred virginity, it was seen as inappropriate to represent the goddess in any form and allow her to become subject to the male gaze.[30] Instances in which her name is seen on artifacts do not indicate her image, but rather invocations of her name for ritual purposes or titles given to human women. Even if the owner or sculptor were to make the same "mistake" and represent her, these depictions do not show the women holding a globe as the library figure does.[31] Consequently, this figure is likely not Hestia.

In relation to the right hand female, Volk assumes that this is Hestia's sister, Demeter. Demeter is the goddess of agriculture, nutrition, crops, human health, fertility, fecundity, and female maturation.[32] She could also guarantee a happy afterlife through her relationship with her daughter Persephone, who lived in the Underworld for part of the year.[33] Like Hestia, Demeter is not often spoken of textually, except in context of Persephone and the myth of her kidnapping by Hades.[34] In a rage, Demeter withholds any crops from growing and only allows them to sprout once her daughter has been returned to her. Unfortunately, Persephone eats fruit from the Underworld prior to this reunion and is forced to live there during what we now know as the winter months.[35] None of these powers or myth relate to the fireplace or the library as a concept. Equally important, none of the iconography ascribed to her fits the representation of a snake wielding woman.

There are a number of motifs that are associated with Demeter. For example, she is often depicted with a garland of corn or ribbon around her head, holding a scepter, corn ears, a poppy, a torch and basket, or a cornucopia.[36] (Figure 6)

Figure 6. Painter of Louvre, *Plutus & Demeter*, Ca. 350 - 340 B.C.E. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu. http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K26.1.html

In select sculptures, Demeter sometimes holds a piglet — the pig being sacred to her as an earth deity and sacrificed to her at festivals.[37] On even rarer occasions, Demeter is depicted in a chariot pulled by snakes.[38] It is arguable that Volk's assumption of this figure as Demeter is based on her connection as Hestia's sister and this visual evidence of serpents. However, this is not a common depiction of Demeter, nor does it reflect the library figure's pose. Therefore, none of these descriptions match the figure holding the snake, and her role as goddess of agriculture does not fit the context of the library space. For these reasons, it is unlikely that this is Demeter.

Both as individuals and as a pair, the assumption of Hestia and Demeter as the left and right hand figures, respectively, are not accurate. Hestia's overall connection to the hearth is logical, but there are no visual or textual sources that suggest Hestia has any relation to the earth. Demeter also lacks this narrative that could correspond to the context of a fireplace or library, and her iconography lacks the visual support to suggest an influence. While it could be argued that the sculptor and owner might have taken artistic license, there are other motifs in the house that closely reference classical sculpture without such vast alteration. Furthermore, there are other identifications that are more probable. With this in mind, I contend these figures are not Hestia or Demeter.

5. Eternal Knowledge and Original Sin

Having argued against Victoria Volk's assumptions of identification, I will put forth my own two interpretations of the statues as either *Aeternitas* and Eve or *Urania* and *Hygieia* based on visual and conceptual comparisons. A cursory glance at formal similarities suggests the pair as *Aeternitas* and Eve. *Aeternitas*, as the personification of eternity, has the potential to reflect Victorian era interest in philosophical conversations on eternity and its relationship to knowledge. On the other hand, Eve, whose biblical context is heavily reliant on the Genesis story, seems to relate to the library figure through the visual representation of the snake. Their indirect relationship to wisdom draws a connection to the library space and to one another. In this way, there seems to be textual significance that could support the identification of these mythological figures. Unfortunately, the lack of pervasive visual representation and the vast difference in artistic reference suggests that these figures are inviable, as their symmetry suggests a pair that should correlate to one another, not differ.

Aeternitas is the Roman personification of eternity, represented as a female, and described as one of the many virtues. There is close to no mythology surrounding *Aeternitas*, except as daughter of Jupiter, for she is a simple personification of an abstract thought.[39] Instead, depictions of her occur on Roman coins, suggesting political significance in ancient Rome. By pairing her iconography with Roman leaders, her presence would have possibly been seen as a sign of good will in wishing an eternal reign of the individual, both on this earth and in the afterlife. Although given to these great leaders, this symbol of eternality was more consistently connected with the eternal nature and reign of the Roman gods.[40] During the Victorian era, the discussion of eternality would take a new direction, focusing

on its relation to the acquisition of knowledge. In order to understand this correlation, I will explain the philosophical connections between eternity and thought as explored during this era.

Having ended at the beginning of the century, the Enlightenment reconstructed everyday perceptions of knowledge and fact towards a more objective way of reasoning, rather than subjective or dogmatic thought. By questioning previously determined "facts", philosophers would eventually question how humans gained knowledge and the metaphysics of thought itself. The leading scholar on this notion was nineteenth century German philosopher Gottliob Frege, who described knowledge as "Thought" (der Gedanke).[41] His general understanding of Thought was as follows:

> What value could there be for us in the eternally unchangeable, which could neither be acted upon nor act upon us? ... Even the timeless, if it is to be something for us, must somehow be implicated with the temporal. What would a Thought be for me which was never grasped by me? But by grasping a Thought I come into a relation to it and it to me… How does a Thought act? By being grasped and being taken to be true.[42]

The theory presented above basically understands Thought as something that exists as we come into contact with it and can change real-world things. For example, if one thinks about the negative impact of humans on the environment, they can change their behavior to help it. This "existence", elaborated on through years of philosophical study and scholarship, led Frege to argue for a concept of abstract Thought that involved eternality.

According to Frege, Thought has always existed outside of the mind and we as humans simply live to become aware of it.[43] This would stir debated philosophical conversations on the acquisition of knowledge in the Victorian era, of which Vanderbilt might have been a participant, although there is no evidence. Reflective of relevant scholarly conversations during the nineteenth century, it is possible that the discussion of Thought as eternal informed the inclusion of the embodiment of eternity in Vanderbilt's library. Not only that, but by understanding knowledge as eternal, it would indirectly reflect the eternal nature of a library, which is filled with and defined by knowledge. Unfortunately, this potential historical evidence is thwarted by the lack of visual support.

Typically, if not exclusively, *Aeternitas*' presence is found on the backs of Roman coins, with the front of these tokens depicting the portraits of Roman leaders. Her iconography is inconclusive, having shifted over time under different rulers. For example, under Vespasian, *Aeternitas* is depicted as holding two heads defined as those of Sol and Luna.[44] (Figure 7)

Figure 7. *Roman Coin of Vespasian and Aeternitas*, 76 C.E.
http://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=deity_facet:Aeternitas.

Conversely, under Titus, representations show *Aeternitas* standing with her left leg on a globe, holding a scepter, and grasping a cornucopia. (Figure 8)

Figure 8 *Roman Coin of Titus and Aeternitas*, 80-81 C.E.
http://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=deity_facet:Aeternitas.

Final depictions involve her holding a globe with a phoenix perched on it in one hand and a column under the other. (Figure 9)

Figure 9. *Roman Coin with Depiction of Aeternitas.* http://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=deity_facet:Aeternitas.

This drastic shift among iconography does not give a single image that matches that of the library mantel figure. Despite Hunt's interest in modifying artwork, these originals are far too different from the Biltmore pieces. This, in combination with a lack of monumental sculpture depicting *Aeternitas*, makes it unlikely that she was an inspiration to either Vanderbilt or Hunt. In sum, it is unconvincing that *Aeternitas* is the visual source for this sculpture.

Moving to the right side figure, the presence of a snake draws what I consider a visual link to the biblical story of Eve, who was urged by a serpent to eat from the Garden of Eden. (Figure 10)

Figure 10. John R. Spencer-Stanhope, *The Temptation of Eve*, 19th c. Oil on Canvas, Collection of Fred and Sherry Ross, United States. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Roddam_Spencer_Stanhope_-_The_Temptation_of_Eve.jpg

Both in art and text, the inclusion of a snake is significant to the narrative of The Fall. The placement of a serpent here as an artistic focal point suggests a potential identification of the right woman as Eve. Additionally, it seems probable that a Christian character would be displayed here as Vanderbilt was a religious man and included such imagery in other locations of his home, including the Joan of Arc and St. Louis sculptures on the exterior of the main staircase.[45] Moreover, Bitter's attention to biblical narratives in his artwork might explain the inclusion of a Christian figure. Be

that as it may, since Bitter's influence was less conceptual than laborious, it seems more likely that Vanderbilt would have been the main influence for including Eve.

In Genesis chapter three, the story of Adam and Eve relays the myth of God's creation of the couple and the subsequent temptation of Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil by a serpent. The typical interpretation of the Gensis story is that of sin, with Eve's moment of disobedience being key. For this reason, both the woman and the snake are described through negative connotations. Conversely, new interpretive thought suggests a more positive understanding, where Eve begins the era of knowledge seeking. By eating from the Tree of Knowledge, scholar David Daube suggests that Eve brings the human race out of an idealized and primitive world into the "real world."[46] Instead of the original sinner, Kent Hieatt suggests, "Eve signifies, at one level, the sciential part of the soul, open to sense impression and Adam, the knowledge of transcendent commands."[47] This reinterpretation by Hieatt posits Eve as a woman of science, and a primitive sort of scholar. In this way, Eve could relate to the larger library space as the woman to beget the path towards scholarly enlightenment, knowledge, and the communication of these ideas. Then again, this philosophy of Eve is a contemporary formulation and so must be dismissed.

There is no discussion during the Victorian era of Eve as a positive seeker of knowledge. While there was a secular transition taking place and some discussion on religion, Christianity was still an integral part of everyday life. It influenced thought, social norms, and even particular scientific endeavors. Although scholars would begin to question the Bible, the text was still overwhelmingly accepted and lived by. Through this lens, Eve and women in general were still viewed as sinful and mysterious. The lack of scholarship or social conversation about this transition of connotations suggests that Eve would not have corresponded to thoughts on intelligence or the seeking of knowledge. Since this reputation of Eve has no basis during the Victorian era, her identification here does not seem likely. This is solidified by the correlation between the two figures, which differ greatly.

As previously stated, the symmetry of the figures inherently proposes a cohesive relationship between them both visually and conceptually. This is also suggested by the thematic relevance that is present in the rest of the home. An example of this is in the banquet hall, which showcases tapestries that display the struggles of Venus and Vulcan throughout different myths.[48] This use of pendants ("to hang together") encompassed hanging artworks together that corresponded to one another narratively so as to tell a story. The evidence elsewhere of narrative spaces suggests that Vanderbilt and Hunt were aware of the interrelations of pieces, causing the inclusion of such vastly different references on the library fireplace to become nonsensical. As one is Christian and the other pagan, it is unlikely that this pair is *Aeternitas* and Eve. To reinforce this argument, I present one more pair that holds the most weight both visually and textually: *Urania* and *Hygieia*.

6. The Celestial and the Terrestrial

Of all the couples put forth in this paper, the most probable identification is that of *Urania* and *Hygieia*. The specificity of visual comparison in their iconography, their contextual references to larger cultural and historical issues, and their allegorical significance in relation to one another provide strong evidence for such interpretations. They signify a vast scope of wisdom, highlighting both Mr. Vanderbilt's encompassing and in-depth intelligence, and reflect the very concept and function of a library. As in the fashion of the previous analyses, the left hand figure will be discussed first.

In reference to Greco-Roman sculpture and painting, the most probable inspiration for the globe-holding figure is *Urania*, the muse of astronomy and the sciences. One of the nine Muses, *Urania* is typically depicted grasping a stylus that she uses to point towards a globe.[49] (Figures 11, 12)

Figure 11. *Urania Fresco from Pompeii*, 62 - 79 C.E. The Louvre Museum, Paris. https://www.ancient.eu/image/3937/
Figure 12. *Statue Restored as Urania*, 4th c. B.C.E. Marble, Room of the Muses, Pius-Clementine Museum, Rome. http://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=1269

This is emblematic of the library figure, who lacks this wand, but is holding a globe in her right hand. In light of the dismissal of *Aeternitas* on the basis of difference in iconography, the same argument could be said of *Urania* since the library sculpture lacks the typical stylus from Greek depictions. However, there is a key difference here. First, *Aeternitas*' depictions are more divergent. The presence of *Urania's* small stylus is significantly less varied than the items *Aeternitas* holds, such as the phoenix, large staff, or heads. Also, *Urania* is consistently depicted holding a globe, unlike *Aeternitas* who may also stand on it or lack the motif altogether. Finally, *Urania*'s conceptual relevance to wisdom is much stronger, as she signifies relevant historical endeavors of the Victorian age through Enlightenment thinking.

Contextually, *Urania* is a Classical symbol of astronomy and science, and so references the Victorian interest in astronomy. In the wake of the Enlightenment, philosophical, religious, and scientific thought shifted from doctrine to objective research with the advent of the scientific method. It suggested that humanity could be improved by rational (rather than religious) change and allowed for the exploration of the sciences without persecution. Shifted into the nineteenth century, the Victorian era saw the continuation of a large interest in the sciences, including astronomy. In fact, this field was one of the most researched during this period and included such names as Sir John Herschel and William Whewell, as well as the intended explorations of the planet Venus in 1874 and 1882.[50] With this in mind, the inclusion of the muse of astronomy would reference these scientific events and individuals, and would suggest Vanderbilt's involvement (at least in reading) of such scholarship. Furthermore, while *Urania*'s presence directly represents astronomy, she also indirectly hints at both secular and religious themes.

Like all the muses in the Greco-Roman period, *Urania* was often called upon by poets and lyrists to divinely inspire their artistic endeavors. Such poets include Homer and Hesiod.[51] This allowed *Urania* to not only reflect the field of science but also that of the arts. The same function of the muse was relevant during both the Renaissance and the Victorian era, although it changed in order to function as a Christian influence during these later periods. This perspective came from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the author invoking *Urania* in order to inspire his poem about The Fall of Satan from Heaven and The Fall of Man from the Genesis story.[52] Milton's use of *Urania* converts her from a Greek muse to a Christian one — this connection establishing *Urania* not only as a muse of poetry and science, but also as a daughter of God and symbol of divine wisdom.[53]

Regardless of Milton's purposeful conversion of *Urania*, the muse in both antiquity and the nineteenth century denotes knowledge and instruction while a heavenly muse might suggest "sacred wisdom" or the "divine science": theology.[54] This is expanded upon by John Steadman, who writes, "She could appropriately symbolize not only astronomy and the elevation of the learned, but also such concepts as the heavenly origin of poetry, the act of proairesis or choice, the contemplation of the sublime, the universality of erudite men, and celestial music or heavenly song."[55] Of particular significance here are the references to the elevation of men and the contemplation of the sublime. The first once again references the idea of the muse as a symbol of wisdom and teaching, while the contemplation of the sublime suggests that a characteristic of being intelligent is to know about God, and contemplate him often. In this

way, *Urania* represents a complex and encompassing understanding of wisdom which involves knowledge of secular, religious, and artistic thought.

Equally important in understanding cultural and historical issues of the Victorian era, the right side mantel figure describes *Hygieia*, the goddess of health. Based on various votive reliefs and statues in which she is portrayed, *Hygieia* is often represented in a long robe, feeding a serpent from a *phiale* (a Greek libation vessel) which she holds in the opposite hand.[56] (Figure 13)

Figure 13. *Hygieia*, Copy of 2nd c. BCE original, Marble, Vatican Museums, Rome. https://www.ancient.eu/image/1299/

This is an exact description of the woman on the right side of the library mantel, who also holds a serpent and *phiale* in her palms. The placement of these two objects varies in which hand they reside, but the description of the winding serpent and its feeding is the same. In antiquity, *Hygieia* was the daughter of *Asklepios*, Greek god of medicine, although there is speculation as to whether she is his daughter or a detached characteristic of his.[57] A religious figure for the Greeks, *Hygieia* was typically depicted alongside her father as a key deity in his cult.[58] While his role was to heal the sick, she was to maintain health in those who were not ill or who were recently healed.[59] This power and association, although seemingly strange in a library space, actually has significance in context of cultural issues of the time.

With a combination of high expansion due to the Industrial Revolution and the lack of advancements in medicine, a number of diseases were rampant in the Victorian era, including smallpox, typhus, tuberculosis, and cholera. In response to this, major medical endeavors began including the establishment of a board of general health. Moreover, with figures such as Sigmund Freud and Ivan Pavlov conducting research during this period, health during the Victorian era likely encompassed mental health. In combination, medicine was a concern of the period and seems to have inspired the inclusion of a health goddess here — not so much to invoke good health upon the family as to showcase interest in the field. Such evidence of concern includes Vanderbilt's personal stake in the medical field. In June of 1900, Vanderbilt fully funded the construction and maintenance of the Clarence Barker Memorial Hospital, which becoming Biltmore Village's main hospital of the time.[60] This was likely in response to his own medical issues, for which he moved to Asheville.[61] By including this figure, it shows personal interest in the field and knowledge of medical literature, and is further supported by the association of the figure itself with the notion of wisdom.

Hygieia's authority on health comes from the presence of the snake, depicted beside her and her father, *Asklepios*, in ancient artwork. The serpent was originally a symbol of ever renewing life of the earth and a savior from disease through the shedding of its skin.[62] However, even in the Greek period, it also had an association with wisdom and cunning as it was a messenger that would not fall for human tricks or ignorance.[63] While *Hygieia* does not have authority over wisdom herself, the connections of such presented by the snake is logical and relevant. To expand on

this, numismatist Warwick Wroth presents an interesting visual interpretation of the goddess that might allude to divine wisdom. He writes:

> We are more likely to seize the true meaning of this feeding of the serpent if we regard it not as a mere piece of more or less frigid symbolism, but as a manifestation of some actual religious ceremony connected with the goddess. [We] may consider her to be engaged in an act of serpentine-divination, and to be taking an omen as to the future health of her suppliants from the manner in which the serpent receives the nourishment offered him.[64]

As divination is typically considered a practice that involves or causes wisdom, the interpretation of *Hygieia* being a divinatory would inspire the same interpretation. In this context, she would also represent knowledge. Henceforth, the use of *Hygieia* as a symbol of the interest in medicine and as a symbol of knowledge (which relates it to the function of a library) provide strong evidence to identify the right hand library figure as the goddess of health.

As can be seen, the figures of *Urania* and *Hygieia* have already proven themselves worthy of identification. Their relationship to the contemporary issues of astronomy and medicine illustrate George Vanderbilt's knowledge and involvement in these fields, as he depicts them in his library. Still, there are further relationships between the two figures that should be explored in order to understand their full significance and solidify these two identifications as the most probable interpretations. These relationships include their nature as subcategories of the overarching field of science, their reflection of the human fear of over-objectification of the human experience, and their reference to ancient literature.

The first relationship that the two figures share is the most obvious one and has already been discussed separately. At face value, these two figures represent the sciences, significant because of their historical and cultural relevance. It therefore makes sense that *Urania* (the muse of astronomy) and *Hygieia* (the goddess of health) are incorporated in a library as pendant figures. These statues would reference the library as a place to explore objective sciences and learn about them, as well as attest to the grandeur of the owner of this space, who must himself be involved and informed about these concepts. In fact, there are a number of volumes in the space that relate to both astronomy and medicine.[65] Moreover, they also represent two very different sciences, as *Urania* reflects the celestial realm while *Hygieia* represents the terrestrial (or human) sphere. As embodiments of these two differing fields, they not only reflect a wide range of knowledge, but also reference the struggle between the two worlds in the Victorian's mind.

A leading novel about the struggles between science and humanity, Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower* (1882) describes the endeavors of Swithin St. Cleeve and Lady Viviette Constantine.[66] Described as a romantic couple, Swithin is an aspiring astronomer and man of objective science, while Lady Constantine is an artist who fears that the strife towards understanding the heavens will eventually leave the complexities and artistry of the human species behind. Although a fictional tale, this novel explored the very real fear of over-objectifying the world and losing the subjective quality of everyday experience.[67] *Urania* and *Hygieia* reflect this fear. *Urania* is, of course, the celestial realm itself and represents the scientific endeavor of understanding it. On the other hand, *Hygieia's* role in modern medicine is to understand the experience of the human condition, both physical and psychological. These statues, then, could either reference this specific novel or the general social phobia.[68] However, this is not the most significant connection between the two statues. Rather, there is allegorical significance of these figures as references to Aphrodite and Athena which links them.

The title 'Urania' (meaning "heavenly" or "of heaven") was given to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in poems and on altars to describe her as a heavenly beauty.[69] In the same vein, the name 'Hygieia' served as a title granted to goddesses who had the ability to heal. Athena, the goddess of war, was most commonly given this name.[70] A number of sculptures of Athena *Hygieia* exist (whether labeled as such or not), depicting the goddess in her typical armor with shield and spear, but with the addition of a snake at her feet. Doctor Michael T. Compton provides evidence of this, suggesting, "Pausanias also mentioned the statue image of Health, along with that of Athena, who is also surnamed Health (Athena Hygieia or Healing Athena) at the Acropolis in Athens and in the Sanctuary of Amphiams in the land of Oropus."[71] This potentially references the Athena Parthenos which is depicted with a snake, even though this is not the statue's official title. While indirect, the use of these titles to reference Athena and Aphrodite are important in referencing a popular Greek poem: Homer's *Iliad*.

As the *Iliad* begins in the midst of the Trojan War, the story actually proceeds this with the myth of the Golden Apple of Discord and the Judgment of Paris. In this tale, Eris, the goddess of strife, becomes offended when she is not invited to the union of Peleus and Thetis. For revenge, she tosses a golden apple into the crowd with the words "to the fairest" written on it. This causes an argument between Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite over who is the most beautiful. When Zeus refuses to choose between them, he delegates Paris, the Trojan prince, to decide. The three goddesses bribe their judge — Hera promising him rule over all of Europe and Asia, Athena promising to make him a skilled

warrior, and Aphrodite promising the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris chooses Aphrodite as the fairest after she promises him the hand of Helen of Sparta, the wife of king Menelaus. This is the beginning of the Trojan War, the subject of the *Iliad*.

By referencing these characters indirectly, the two fireplace figures relate to each other as an allegory for the story preceding and within the *Iliad* itself. Through her title, *Urania* signifies Aphrodite, the goddess who essentially caused the Trojan War. Her bribery of Paris with the hand of Helen, a married woman, caused the uproar by Menelaus, who would gather the Greeks to fight with him. Aphrodite is also present within the *Iliad*, as she saves Paris from his near death by the hand of Menelaus and saves her son, Aeneas, from dying in battle and herself gets wounded.[72] Likewise, *Hygieia's* vocabulary connection to Athena references this precursory myth about the contest of beauty, as Athena is one of the goddesses fighting over the Golden Apple. She is also a key deity of the tale of the *Iliad* itself, fighting alongside the Greeks in human form to help them to victory, contrary to the will of her father Zeus, who favors the Trojans.[73] Henceforth, *Urania* and *Hygieia's* titles, bestowed upon other goddesses, indirectly reference two key deities in the *Iliad* and therefore draw conceptual links to this Classical poem.

The reference of the *Iliad* by these sculptures is solidified by the choice of tapestry in the center of the fireplace. A seventeenth century Aubusson tapestry, this textile depicts the Banquet of Alcinous from the *Odyssey*, the sequel to the *Iliad*.[74] (Figure 14)

Figure 14. *The Banquet of Alcinous*, 17th century, Aubusson, The Biltmore Estate, Asheville. http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.255.html/2017/collections-l17304

It should be noted here that this banquet textile is a replacement to an earlier tapestry, *La Bohemienne (The Fortune Teller)*, which was based on François Boucher's painting in 1762.[75] (Figure 15)

Figure 15. François Boucher, *La Bohemienne (The Fortune Teller),* 1762, The Italian Village Series, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. https://art.famsf.org/fran%C3%A7ois-boucher/fortune-teller-la-bohemienne-italian-village-scenes-fetes-italiennes-4921

Speculation surrounding the tapestry suggests that the replacement occurred because of the poor quality of preservation of *La Bohemienne*. However, visual comparison between the two cloths shows that they have both deteriorated in a similar fashion with the majority of the color having faded. In fact, if the goal was to replace the cloth with a better preserved material, then the commissioner failed. The Banquet tapestry only retains shades of blue and beige, while the Boucher tapestry still maintains faded shades of greens and reds in addition to blue and beige. With this in mind, it is more likely that the relevance of the *Odyssey* scene in context of the reference to the *Iliad* was most likely the reason for the replacement.

Taking place ten years later, the *Odyssey* describes the struggles of Odysseus, and his subsequent kidnapping by the nymph Calypso. This banquet by Alcinous is the moment in which Odysseus relays his heroic adventures to the King and Queen of the Phaeacians, making it a key moment in the *Odyssey*.[76] This scene was purposefully chosen to accompany these statues. As in contemporary society, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are inseparable. They represent the peak of poeticism in Classical and Neo-Classical thought. By depicting these artifacts together, the fireplace gives an encompassing tale of the Trojan War and its aftermath, attesting to Vanderbilt's knowledge of these stories and his ability to manipulate artwork to create a complex allegory. While they represent the sciences, the statues also represent the arts through this narrative. This combination provides an encompassing range of references, providing an amazing dynamism that references the vast amounts of knowledge that can be found in Vanderbilt's library and, in fact, represents the very nature of what a library is.

7. Conclusion

Having gone through a detailed analysis of three possible pairs for these two library mantel figures, only one set seems to stand out as the accurate identification. Hestia, goddess of the hearth, relates to the physical space of a fireplace, but her lack of visual or textual associations with a globe seem to dismiss her as the left side figure. Similarly, Demeter's lack of artistic and textual comparisons in relation to a snake wielding woman makes her identification seem unlikely. *Aeternitas'* nature as the personification of eternity could reflect Victorian era interests on conversations of the eternality of Thought, but her visual representations do not seem consistent enough to provide a match. Likewise, Eve's contemporary associations to knowledge seem like a link, but are not expressed during the relevant era. Therefore, it is the final pair that I find to be the most probable.

Through their associations with wisdom, the figures of *Urania* and *Hygieia* serve to draw connections between the library and its function as a space for acquiring knowledge. Additionally, their historical and cultural significance to the Victorian interest in astronomy and medicine provide a framework for understanding Vanderbilt's prestige by showcasing his involvement in the major sciences of the time. Furthermore, their relationship as references to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* draws connections to art and poetry, and serves to show that they were intentionally placed together

by the owner to create an interesting narrative as a focal point of the room. As one of the largest artworks in the space, these figures would have likely been conversation pieces between Mr. Vanderbilt and his guests. Therefore, the lack of information should not be credited to a lack of attention, but rather should be explored to see if there is any missing information. With such strong evidence for comparison and as a result of their detailed analysis, I posit that rather than arbitrary and ambiguous representations of Greek-Roman goddesses, these figures have very specific identities: that of *Urania* and *Hygieia.*

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9. Endnotes

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3. John Morrill Bryan, *Biltmore Estate: The Most Distinguished Private Place* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 87, 143.
4. Ibid. 129.
5. Ibid. 143.
6. Henry, Interview.
7. Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 141.
8. Information confirmed by Biltmore Estate staff through personal conversation by author.
9. Ibid.
10. Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 135.
11. Volk, *The Biltmore Estate*, 29-30.
12. Ibid. 29-35.
13. Ibid. 30-31.
14. Ferdinand Schevill, *Karl Bitter: A Biography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 27.
15. Ibid. 107. See also Schevill, *Karl Bitter*, 5.
16. Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 129-130.
17. Volk, *The Biltmore Estate*, 106-108.
18. Schevill, *Karl Bitter*, 20.
19. Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 133.
20. Ibid. 51.
21. Ibid. 107.
22. Ibid. 123.
23. Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 133.
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25. Volk, *The Biltmore Estate*, 132.
26. Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology* (Oxford: ABC-Clio, 1998), 163-164.
27. Jean-Joseph Goux, "Vesta, or the Place of Being," *Representations* 1, no. 1 (February 1983), 92.
28. Ibid.
29. Warwick Wroth, "Hygieia," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 5 (1884), 100.
30. Mika Kajava, "Hestia Hearth, Goddess, and Cult," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 102 (2004), 1-2.

31. Ibid. 6-20.
32. Dixon-Kennedy, *Greco-Roman Mythology*, 108-109.
33. Sarah Iles Johnston, "Demeter, Myths, and the Polyvalence of Festivals," *History of Religions* 52, no. 4 (2013), 374.
34. Ibid. 371. Linked to the Underworld because of Persephone, Demeter is associated with the serpent for its chthonic nature and related to its associations with fertility in literature. However, for reasons described in this paper, this association does not seem to provide enough evidence for its inclusion in the library.
35. Richard Seaford, "Demeter Hymn," *Cosmology and the Polis*, 24-51.
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37. Johnston, "Polyvalence of Festivals," 377.
38. Eleonóra Babejová, "She Will Wind Herself around You," *Jung Journal* 5, no. 3 (2011), 98.
39. Dixon-Kennedy, *Greco-Roman Mythology*, 17.
40. Eleonore Stump, and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 8 (1981), 430. See Boethius.
41. Gregory Currie, "Frege on Thoughts," *Mind, New Series*, 89, no. 354 (1980), 235.
42. Ibid.
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44. "FiltersMap Results," Online Coins of the Roman Empire: Browse Collection, accessed March 28, 2018, http://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=deity_facet:Aeternitas.
45. Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 131.
46. John Hyman, "The Tree of Knowledge," *Think* 9, no. 25 (Summer 2010), 9-17.
47. A. Kent Hieatt, "Eve as Reason in a Tradition of Allegorical Interpretation of the Fall," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 43 (1980), 226.
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52. John Milton, and Matthew S. Stallard, *Paradise Lost: The Biblically Annotated Edition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011).
53. Steadman, ""MEANING" AND "NAME,"" 218. See also Stella P. Revard, "Milton's Muse and the Daughters of Memory," *English LiteraryRenaissance* 9, no. 3 (1979).
54. Steadman, ""MEANING" AND "NAME,"" 229.
55. Ibid. 212.
56. Dixon-Kennedy, *Greco-Roman Mythology*, 167. See also Wroth, "Hygieia," 88.
57. Michael T. Compton, "The Association of Hygieia with Asklepios in Graeco-Roman Asklepieion Medicine," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 57, no. 3 (2002), 313.
58. Ibid. 312
59. Ibid. 324.
60. "Clarence Barker Memorial Hospital (Biltmore Hospital) -- Asheville, North Carolina: A National Register of Historic Places Travel Itinerary," National Parks Service, accessed April 02, 2018, https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/asheville/cla.htm.
61. Volk, *The Biltmore Estate*, 26. "George himself was plagued by frail health of an indefinite nature. On the advice of physicians, he traveled to Asheville, North Carolina to take advantage of the mild climate and mountain air."
62. Wroth, "Hygieia," 91.
63. Babejová, "She Will Wind Herself," 103.
64. Wroth, "Hygieia," 92.
65. Henry, Interview. Specific titles confirmed for author's reference only.
66. Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, (London: Macmillan, 1952).
67. Peck, "Realism and Victorian Astronomy," 34-35.
68. Henry, Interview.
69. More often, though, the title was used as a colloquial term in describing her, and so there are not any visual differences to determine which sculptures of Aphrodite would have been deemed as such.

70. H. B. Walters, "Athena Hygieia," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 19 (1899), 165-68.
71. Michael T. Compton, "The Association of Hygieia," 318.
72. Homer, and Stephen Mitchell, *The Iliad*, (New York: Free Press, 2011), Book 3, Lines 357-359. See also Ibid. 78-79, Book 5, Lines 292-320.
73. Ibid. 55-108, Books 4-6.
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10. Resources

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