

## Lex Hermans

### Dynastic Pride in the Farnese Theatre at Parma

From 1615 onwards Duke Ranuccio I of Parma and Piacenza (1569–1622) sought to arrange a marriage between his son Odoardo (born 1612) and a Medici princess. When in 1617 it was announced that Cosimo II of Tuscany would travel to Milan, Ranuccio saw this as an opportunity to entertain the grand duke on his progress. He had built a huge theatre in his palace at Parma, with capacity to seat some 1,500 guests, which was arranged according to ideas about courtly theatres that were developed over the sixteenth century. It is an impressive architectonic construction, richly decorated with meaningful paintings and statues, and designed for broadcasting its patron's status and magnificence to foreign guests and local notables.

In this essay, the structure and the decoration of the *Teatro Farnese* are considered as a 'distributed portrait'; the theatre was a visual portfolio of Ranuccio's various qualities. The statues of personified virtues, evenly divided between followers of the goddess of war and of the Muses, the deities to which the duke dedicated the theatre, testified to his balanced rule and fair way of acting, to his magnanimity, and to his pursuit of the arts. The form of the theatre itself also shows this double connection: it can be used as an arena for indoor jousting and military 'ballets', and it contains a stage where to perform musical and theatrical shows. The architectural shell, with its palace-like stage set and its two tiers of Serlian arches would remind visitors of the renaissance tradition that identified theatres as the original places of government assemblies. Also, this architecture resembled—and surpassed in splendour—the recently finished town hall (called *basilica*) and the *Teatro olimpico* in Vicenza, both designed by Andrea Palladio. Two more than life size equestrian statues of Ranuccio's father and grandfather, dressed as Roman generals and/or emperors, together with the ceiling which depicted Jupiter on his eagle (here symbolizing Pope Paul III, Ranuccio's great-great-grandfather), made the theatre into a Capitol, and Parma into a new Rome. All elements in the room referred to Ranuccio's ancestry, to the traditions of his family, and to his hereditary right to rule. Taken together, the theatre was an idealized portrait of *this* Farnese.

The purpose of this building was manifold: to make a favourable impression on Cosimo II; to represent the power of the Farnese state and dynasty; to surpass other Italian rulers in their ongoing contest of *magnificentia*; to symbolize Ranuccio's own qualities and characteristics to every visitor; and to offer a catalogue of a true ruler's virtues for future Farneses to imitate.