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Author(s): Max Marmor

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## A PATTERN FOR THE *PRIMAVERA*

Max Marmor

Aby Warburg, whose seminal dissertation on Botticelli's *Primavera* in the Uffizi initiated the search for the painting's literary antecedents and sources, also considered the likelihood that the artist's classicizing imagery was inspired by specific antiquities.<sup>1</sup> That aspect of Warburg's legacy has been relatively neglected in subsequent scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Botticelli scholars have also adopted too readily the assumption that, in Herbert Horne's words, "for the composition of the picture there is no precedent."<sup>3</sup> In fact, Botticelli seems to have enlisted a specific visual model in working out the *Primavera*'s singular composition, in which the principal figures and figural groups are, as nearly every student of the painting has observed, disposed in a curiously episodic manner (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> This model, an illustration of Dante's Earthly Paradise from a well-known quattrocento Sienese illuminated manuscript of the *Divina Commedia*, seems not only visually compelling, but all the more apposite when considered within the context of Botticelli's abiding engagement with Dante's poem as reader and as illustrator. And, as I have recently suggested, the frequently noted similarities in imagery and tone between the artist's rendering of Spring and Dante's evocation of the Earthly Paradise themselves bear witness not only to that engagement, but to Botticelli's close reading of Cristoforo Landino's commentary on Dante, which appeared alongside the poem in the famous 1481 edition—the

very edition for which Botticelli himself is thought of have produced a set of preliminary designs.<sup>5</sup>

Among the illustrations in the well-known Yates Thompson codex of the *Divina Commedia* in the British Library, lavishly decorated in mid-quattrocento Siena, there is a particularly beautiful rendering of the Earthly Paradise (Fig. 2; fol. 116v).<sup>6</sup> The Yates Thompson Master's selection of subjects in this miniature and their placement within the embracing setting of the Earthly Paradise reflect a close and sensitive reading of the final cantos of the *Purgatorio*, powerfully condensing Dante's main themes into a single image of considerable beauty.

The miniature is primarily devoted to Dante's dream of Leah and Rachel, described in *Purgatorio* XXVII.94 ff.

Ne l'ora, credo, che de l'oriente  
prima raggiò nel monte Citerea,  
che de foco d'amor par sempre ardente,  
giovane e bella in sogno mi pareo  
donna vedere andar per una landa  
cogliende fiore; e cantando . . .

[In the hour, I think, when (Venus) Cytherea,  
who seems always burning with the fire of  
love, first shone on the mountain from the  
east, I seemed to see in a dream a lady  
young and beautiful going through a meadow,  
gathering flowers, and singing . . . ]  
(*Purgatorio* XXVII.94–99)<sup>8</sup>

This "lady young and beautiful" identifies herself as the biblical Leah and introduces



Fig. 1 Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*. Uffizi, Florence



Fig. 2 Yates Thompson Master, *Dante's Earthly Paradise*. (British Library, MS Yates Thompson 36, fol. 116v)

her silent companion as her sister Rachel, who sits motionless upon the grass before a mirror. In this, one of Dante's several "prophetic morning dreams," both the sylvan setting and the encounter with Leah herald the poet's imminent entry into the Earthly Paradise, situated atop Mt. Purgatory, and his encounter with Matelda, the resident spirit of that other Eden. Landino, in his commentary, stresses the importance of Dante's dream of Leah and Rachel, which he insists is not a mere dream, but rather a "vision" (*visione*), for Dante's entire Earthly Paradise narrative.<sup>10</sup>

At the left side of the miniature, Dante dreams in the foreground, huddled together with Virgil and Statius, who has recently joined the poets on their journey. At the center of the scene, in a departure from the convention adopted in most illustrated Dantes,

we behold the very stuff of Dante's dream, as Leah stoops to pick a flower, flanked by the seated figure of her sister Rachel. At the right, we see the three poets' subsequent encounter with Matelda and Dante addressing her for the first time. The artist thus underscores the typological relationship between Leah and Matelda, universally recognized by early commentators, very much including Landino, as types of the *vita activa*, by rendering these two episodes side by side in the Earthly Paradise and by moving the dream of Leah to center stage as if he wished to focus on and share the poet's "vision."<sup>11</sup>

Suggestive compositional similarities between this enchanting rendering of the Earthly Paradise and the *Primavera* meet the eye. In each case, seemingly independent triads of figures define the painting's

rhythm. The three poets, recurring in continuous narrative, define this pattern in the miniature, while in the *Primavera* the three Graces on the left are echoed by a balancing trio of figures at the right, Zephyr pursuing Chloris, transformed into the goddess Flora. In each instance, too, it is the sylvan setting above all that unifies the composition, the figures being disposed across a shallow foreground stage, a strip of flower-bedecked lawn curtained off at the rear by a thick hedge of trees and shrubbery and receding slightly to accommodate a central figural group. Across this stage, a number of figures, ten in the miniature, nine in the *Primavera*, are disposed episodically, singly or in small groups, with no conventional narrative continuity connecting them.

If we view the miniature in reverse (Fig. 3), this sense of rhythmic symmetry is enhanced. In the miniature, the circle of poets (now at the left) is joined by the liminal figure of Matelda, whom Dante, the centermost of the poets, addresses. In the branches overhead, an angel, with arm extended, descends toward Dante to remove from his brow the final token of his fallen state. The left side of the *Primavera* invites comparison with this ensemble. The centermost of the three Graces turns as she dances and looks toward the liminal figure of Mercury, who, though facing away from the trio, assumes a pose not entirely unlike that of Matelda in the miniature. In the treetops above, Cupid, recalling in scale and gesture the angel in the miniature, aims a flaming dart at the foremost of the Graces. Obviously, the compositional parallels are not exact (the angel is straight above Dante, but Cupid, as Venus's son, hovers near her and aims his dart diagonally); nonetheless, this miniature seems to have provided Botticelli, already exploring with Landino's help

the meaning and imagery of the Earthly Paradise episode,<sup>12</sup> with a thematically related source of visual inspiration for the *Primavera*, which has so often seemed entirely anomalous as a composition.<sup>13</sup>

Botticelli provided his painting with the unambiguous focal point lacking in the miniature—a powerful vision of “celestial Venus.”<sup>14</sup> And yet the Yates Thompson Master, in allowing the beholder to share Dante's dream of Leah and Rachel, offered a richly evocative compositional model, one rendered all the more germane for being devoted to what Landino expressly described—and, therefore, what Botticelli would have understood—as an especially significant “vision.” In her frontality, moreover, Botticelli's Venus invites comparison with Rachel, who, though seated, is nearly equal in stature to the other figures; and Venus's pose, too, might owe something to Rachel's. Similarly, a memory of Leah seems to linger in the figure of Flora. Both maidens proceed forward from the right, gathering or scattering flowers. So, too, while Cupid recalls the angel in the miniature, he has been moved decisively to center stage, reinforcing Botticelli's desired compositional effect.

That Botticelli studied the Sienese codex, commissioned by or for Alfonso of Aragon in the 1440s, while producing his preliminary drawings for the Landino Dante of 1481 is now generally assumed by students of Botticelli's Dante illustrations.<sup>15</sup> How he came to do so remains unclear. The codex had presumably been in the Aragonese library in Naples for decades by that time, although an early inventory fails to cite any Dante manuscripts in the collection.<sup>16</sup> But it is worth recalling that Lorenzo de' Medici, excommunicated in the aftermath of the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478, promptly sought





Fig. 3 Yates Thompson Master, *Dante's Earthly Paradise* (reversed)

an alliance with the Aragonese of Naples, themselves allies of the papacy. That Lorenzo il Magnifico arranged for his young cousin and ward, Lorenzo di Pierfancesco, to marry Semiramide Appiani was surely no accident: the Appiani were themselves closely tied to the Aragonese through marriage. A strong bond with the Appiani through marriage would thus have significantly advanced Lorenzo's diplomatic interests by bringing the Medici closer to the Aragonese.<sup>17</sup> Could these domestic and diplomatic maneuvers have provided an opportunity for Botticelli to study an esteemed Dante manuscript from the Aragonese library, perhaps during his Roman sojourn? This seems the more plausible if, as suggested here, the artist's interest in consulting the Sienese codex arose partly in connection with his work on the *Primavera* commission, usually assumed to be related to the Medici-Appiani wedding,<sup>18</sup> and still

more so if, as is sometimes proposed,<sup>19</sup> Lorenzo il Magnifico himself commissioned the *Primavera* in connection with the betrothal of his young ward.

Why would Botticelli model his composition on a miniature in an illustrated Dante? Given the likelihood that Botticelli was himself illustrating Dante during the very years in which the *Primavera* was commissioned and conceived, the fact that the miniature so beautifully captures key episodes of Dante's Earthly Paradise narrative might have been reason enough for him to enlist its help, especially if he had the Earthly Paradise episode itself in mind in developing the very imagery and thematics of his own *paradiso terrestre*. But as the first and most complex of Botticelli's mythological paintings, the *Primavera* must also have presented a purely compositional challenge. How to render the pictorial conventions of quattrocento domestic decora-

tion on a more monumental scale and with the seriousness traditionally reserved for religious paintings?<sup>20</sup> How to deploy a large number of figures across the panel without recourse to traditional narrative techniques? The Sienese miniature offered a solution

that had the added benefit of resonating with precisely the themes the artist was called upon to represent, and especially the challenge of portraying a visionary sequence conceived *alla dantesca*.

## NOTES

I am most grateful to Francis Ames-Lewis, Paul Barolsky, Horst Bredekamp, Caroline Elam, Creighton Gilbert, and Ralph Lieberman for reading and commenting upon previous drafts of this article. The suggestion presented here was initially formulated as an appendix to my thesis, "Antiquity and the Sistine Sojourn in the Art of Sandro Botticelli and Domenico Ghirlandaio" (California State University, Northridge, 1982), supervised by Donald S. Strong.

1. A. Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'" (1893), repr. in A. Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1932; repr. New York: Johnson, 1969), I, pp. 5–68, 308–328, and in *id.*, *Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen*, ed. D. Wuttke, 2d ed. (Baden-Baden: Körner, 1980), pp. 11–64. Eng. trans. in A. Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. Kurt W. Forster, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), pp. 88–156, 405–431.

2. But see Ronald W. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), I, pp. 80 f.; A. Luchs, "A Maenad from Pisa in the *Primavera*," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 24 (1980):369–371. Recently, Horst Bredekamp has observed that Botticelli, called to Rome in 1481 by Sixtus IV to collaborate on the Sistine Chapel decoration, evidently seized the opportunity to study closely the antiquities assembled and displayed in the del Bufalo Collection, and that the artist derived direct visual inspiration for the figural imagery of the *Primavera* from this study. Bredekamp further proposes, on the basis of the visual and related stylistic evidence, that the painting must have been executed in the years following the artist's return from Rome in 1482, most likely toward the middle of the decade. See Horst Bredekamp, *Sandro Botticelli, La*

*Primavera: Florenz als Garten der Venus* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988), pp. 22–24, who accepts the persuasive evidence adduced by H. Wrede, *Der Antikengarten der del Bufalo bei der Fontana Trevi*, Trierer Winckelmannprogramme, 4 (Mainz am Rhein: Zabern, 1983), esp. pp. 17–18.

3. H. P. Horne, *Botticelli, Painter of Florence* (1908; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 60.

4. F. Zöllner has recently commented on the episodic structure of the painting in his article on the literary sources and iconography of the *Primavera*, "Zu den Quellen und zur Ikonographie von Sandro Botticelli's 'Primavera,'" *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 50 (1997):131–158, 357–366. On 137 and 152, the author suggests that the "paratactic," or "additive," disposition of the figures is a function of the heterogeneity of the painting's literary sources—and perhaps also the "conflictual reality" of an "arranged" marriage. I think that this view underestimates the artist's autonomy and that it makes more sense to study the painting's composition in the context of specific visual traditions.

5. See M. Marmor, "From Purgatory to the *Primavera*: Some Observations on Botticelli and Dante," *Artibus et Historiae* (forthcoming; available in preprint on the Web at <http://mywebpages.comcast.net/mmarmor/Primavera.htm>).

6. The codex, Yates Thompson MS 36, first published by John Pope-Hennessy, *A Sienese Codex of the Divine Comedy* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1947), is also discussed in Millard Meiss, "The Yates Thompson Dante and Priamo della Quercia," *Burlington Magazine* 106 (Sept. 1964):403–412, and in P. Brieger, M. Meiss, and C. S. Singleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). The codex was illuminated by two hands. Pope-Hennessy attributes the miniatures in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* to Lorenzo Vec-

chietta, Meiss to Priamo della Quercia, while Giulietta Chelazzi Dini argues for an attribution to Nicola d'Unisse da Siena: "Lorenzo Vecchietta, Priamo della Quercia, Nicola da Siena: Nuove osservazioni sulla Divina Commedia Yates Thompson 36," in *Jacopo della Quercia fra Gotico e Rinascimento*, ed. Giulietta Chelazzi Dini (Florence: Centro Di, 1977), pp. 203–228. All scholars agree that the *Paradiso* miniatures are by Giovanni di Paolo; see most recently John Pope-Hennessy, *Paradiso: The Illuminations to Dante's Divine Comedy by Giovanni di Paolo* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993). On the Siennese tradition of Dante illustration generally, see now C. De Benedictis, "La Fortuna della Divina commedia nella miniatura senese," *Studi di storia dell'arte* 8 (1997): 49–68.

7. In view of the lack of consensus about the identity of the illustrator of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, I adopt here Pope-Hennessy's suggestion (personal communication, 1987) and call the artist the Yates Thompson Master.

8. Dante is cited here in the accessible edition and (prose) translation of Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

9. C. Speroni, "Dante's Prophetic Morning Dreams," *Studies in Philology* 45 (1981):50–59.

10. Christoforo Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia* (1481), p. 1447, with reference to *Purgatorio* XXVII.94–96. All references to Landino's commentary on Dante are based on P. Procaccioli's admirable new critical edition: Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia*, Edizione nazionale dei commenti danteschi 28, 4 vols. continuously paginated (Rome: Salerno, 2001).

11. See Marmor, *passim*.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Creighton Gilbert studied the curious but significant role of figural and compositional reversal in Renaissance art in "Some Findings on Early Works of Titian," *Art Bulletin* 62, no. 1 (1980):36–75 (esp. 36–52). He wisely notes that "art-historical comparisons like these, alleging influence, of course always involve less than full identity of motif, and are thus very vulnerable to the simple allegation of being unconvincing, which is sure to be offered by some observers about every comparison" and expresses the wish that there were "any even slightly firmer test of sufficiency in comparisons, to keep those examples that passed it from being voted down (and those that failed it from being offered)." I am not suggesting here anything resembling "identity of motif," only

that Botticelli, grappling with how to design the *Primavera*, took helpful compositional inspiration from the Siennese master. It is also worth recalling the words of Jacques Mesnil, one of the most thoughtful and sensitive scholars ever to write about Botticelli: "The question of links between the art of Botticelli and the Siennese school awaits solution. But . . . one can affirm . . . that Botticelli has not imitated, but that he has assimilated, elaborated, recreated" (*Botticelli* [Paris: Michel, 1938], p. 189, my translation).

14. Landino, in his commentary, insists that it is "celestial Venus" who leads the poet throughout his spiritual pilgrimage—"Dante dimostra, che Venere celeste lo conduca" (Landino, *Comento*, p. 1045, with reference to *Purgatorio* I.19–21). See Marmor, *passim*.

15. K. Clark, *The Drawings by Sandro Botticelli for Dante's Divine Comedy after the Originals in the Berlin Museums and the Vatican* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), p. 16, first argued persuasively that this was the case, citing parallels with Botticelli's *Inferno* illustrations and Baldini's engravings. Reviewing Clark's book in *Burlington Magazine* 120 (June 1978):397–398, L. D. Ettlinger described this suggestion as being "of great interest." More recently, H.-T. Schulze Altcapenberg, *Sandro Botticelli: The Drawings for Dante's Divine Comedy* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000), p. 40, has written that Botticelli "presumably" knew the Siennese codex (see also nn. 11–12); see also J. Schewski's essay in the same exhibition catalogue, entitled "Illuminated Manuscripts of the *Divine Comedy*: Botticelli and Dante Illustrations in the 14th and 15th Centuries" (pp. 312–317). On the latter topic, see B. J. Watts, "Sandro Botticelli's Illustrations for *Inferno* VIII and IX: Narrative Revision and the Role of Manuscript Tradition," *Word and Image* 11, no. 2 (1995):149–173.

16. While sixteenth-century inventories of the library list five Dante manuscripts, one probably to be identified with the Yates Thompson manuscript, an inventory of the library made in 1481 (Paris, Bibl. Nat. ms. Nouv. Acq. Lat. 1986) lists no Dante manuscripts; the inventory is reprinted in T. De Marinis, *La Biblioteca Napoletana dei re d'Aragona*, 4 vols. (Milan: Hoepli, 1947–1953), II, pp. 189–192.

17. See Zöllner, 153.

18. M. Rohlmann, "Botticellis 'Primavera': Zu Anlass, Adressat und Funktion von mythologischen Gemälden im Florentiner Quattrocento," *Artibus et Historiae* 17, no. 33 (1996):97–132, has recently mar-



shaded contextual evidence suggesting that the *Primavera* was, as has often been suggested, commissioned in connection with Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici's marriage to Semiramide Appiani in July 1482. He argues further that the painting must, therefore, be understood in the context of contemporary domestic decorative and pictorial conventions, especially those associated with marriage. This theory, in support of which Rohlmann adduces stylistic as well as historical arguments, has also been championed by Frank Zöllner. Even in the absence of a consensus about the stylistic evidence and the date of the commission, one might observe that if the painting was in fact initially *commissioned* in connection with the patron's betrothal, its execution might well have been interrupted or delayed, like Botticelli's work on the Landino Dante, by the artist's Sistine commission, much as the wedding itself was delayed by a death in the family. And Botticelli's Roman sojourn—and with it his first exposure to the Eternal City's antiqui-

ties—might, in turn, have fundamentally shaped the *Primavera*'s imagery, as Bredekamp proposes.

19. See most recently Zöllner, 152.

20. E. H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neo-platonic Symbolism of His Circle" (1945), reprinted in E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (London: Phaidon, 1972), pp. 31–81, observed early on that in his painted "mythologies," Botticelli treats his classical themes with the seriousness of religious art and sought to explain this fact by closely attending to the precise setting of the commission and the painting's moral and spiritual message. Rohlmann, *passim*, has more recently taken up the same point, arguing again that the painting embodies the confluence of two streams of activity in quattrocento Florentine painting: domestic interior decoration and religious art. I have suggest rather (Marmor, *passim*) that Landino provided this bridge by endowing the imagery of the pastoral with the solemn meanings of high art.