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From Purgatory to the *Primavera*: Some Observations on Botticelli and Dante

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Once more Botticelli and Dante

Since the rediscovery of Sandro Botticelli in the 19th century,¹ several poets have responded in their verse to the painter's elusive *Primavera* in the Uffizi (fig. 1)², and the famous painting has been studied, with varying combinations of sensitivity and learning, by more eminent art historians than perhaps any other work of Renaissance art.³ The chronicle of close readings, beginning with Aby Warburg's "admirable little work" of 1893,⁴ would make for a fascinating anthology of 20th-century art historical

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¹ M. Levey, "Botticelli and nineteenth-century England," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23 (1966): 291-306; F. Kermode, "Botticelli recovered," in his *Forms of attention* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), p.3-31.

² See especially R. Clements, "Botticelli's *Primavera* and *Venere*: eighteen literary readings," *Forum italicum* 13, no. 4 (1979): 439-53 and, more recently, Paul Barolsky, "The ethereal voluptas of Botticelli," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* 64, no.2 (1995): 65-70.

³ The classic monograph on Botticelli remains H. Horne's magisterial monograph of 1908, reprinted as *Sandro Botticelli, painter of Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). The most important recent monograph is R. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli, 2v.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), with a catalogue raisonné, an appendix of documents and full bibliography through the 1970s.

⁴ Horne, p.54, referring to Warburg's seminal dissertation, "Sandro Botticelli's Geburt der Venus und Frühling," (1893), reprinted in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1932; reprinted, Nendeln: Johnson Reprints, 1969), I, p.5-68, 308-28, and in Warburg, *Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen*, ed. D. Wuttke, 2nd ed. (Baden-Baden: KÖrner, 1980), p.11-64. English trans. in Warburg, *The renewal of pagan antiquity: contributions to the cultural history of the European Renaissance*, ed. by Kurt Förster (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), p.88-156, 405-31. In this article I will make no attempt to cite the literature on the *Primavera* comprehensively, since to do so would be to row hopelessly against a current of footnotes. For an initial orientation to the literature, see the ample references in recent articles by M. Rohlmann, "Botticelli's 'Primavera': zu Anlass, Adressat und Funktion von mythologischen Gemälden im Florentiner Quattrocento," *Artibus et historiae* 17, n.33 (1996): 97-132, and F. Zöllner, "Zu den Quellen und zur Ikonographie von Sandro Botticelli's 'Primavera,'" *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 50 (1997): 131-58, 357-66; Zöllner's argument is summarized in English in his *Botticelli: images of love and spring* (Munich and N.Y.: Prestel, 1998), p.[32]-67. Influential discussions of the *Primavera* cited below include: E.H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: a study in the neo-platonic symbolism of his circle" (1945), reprinted in Gombrich, *Symbolic images* (London: Phaidon, 1972), p.31-81; M. Levi d'Ancona, *Botticelli's Primavera: a botanical interpretation including astrology, alchemy and the Medici* (Florence: Olschki, 1983); C. Dempsey, *The portrayal of love: Botticelli's Primavera and humanist culture at the time of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and H. Bredekamp, *Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera*:

methodologies. If no consensus about the painting's "meaning" has emerged, that is attributable to a few key factors, above and beyond the guild's generational need to rethink the meaning of masterpieces — and the real possibility that, as the philosopher F.H. Bradley memorably said of metaphysics, art historical hermeneutics is "the finding of bad reasons for what we believe on instinct."

For one thing, scholars have been unable convincingly to define the precise *genre* of the painting. With the *Primavera* and related works, Botticelli seems to have helped define a new genre that emerged in Italy in the 1470s, the monumental mythological painting. Hence the very novelty of the painting suggests that it cannot be wholly explained in terms of established pictorial conventions, while, on the other hand, only an understanding of those conventions, and of the rules of decorum they both reflected and reinforced, can provide an essential curb on the interpreter's imagination.⁵

Add to this the inescapably *poetic* character of the painting, which in its imagery and style is so evocative of the rich pastoral tradition in western literature. On the reasonable assumption that Botticelli was not technically a learned painter — certainly not as learned by half as the erudite professors who mostly wrote about him in the 20th century — many scholars have felt compelled to conclude that a painting as richly resonant of literary conventions as the *Primavera* must have been shaped fundamentally by the hand of a learned "humanist adviser."⁶ But we have neither independent evidence that such an adviser existed, nor, finally, much direct evidence concerning the scope of Botticelli's *own* learning. We thus lack a sure *cultural and intellectual context* for the painting and its genesis.

And yet we do know *something* about Botticelli's personal literary culture. Much less, granted, than we know about the learning and literary tastes of the relatively few Renaissance artists who, unlike Botticelli, left a significant literary legacy (Alberti, Ghiberti, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Dürer), but significantly more than we *usually* know about the intellectual culture of early Renaissance artists.⁷ For our earliest witnesses agree that Botticelli had a serious and abiding interest in Dante, and their testimony receives ample confirmation from several of his surviving works. The purpose of this article is to view the *Primavera* in the context of what we know, and what we can reasonably surmise, about the artist's own literary and intellectual culture, and especially his lifelong engagement, as reader, exegete and artist, with Dante's *Divina Commedia*.

In his distinctly unsympathetic profile of the painter's life, Giorgio Vasari, impatient as always with behavior smacking of a lack of professionalism on the part of his subjects, chides Botticelli for his protracted dalliance with Dante. Botticelli, he writes, "per essere persona sofistica commentò una parte di Dante, e figurò lo Inferno e lo

Florenz als Garten der Venus (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1988), proposing a political interpretation in which the painting becomes a document of the strains between the two branches of the Medici family. For the recent restoration of the *Primavera*, see U. Baldini et al., *Primavera: the restoration of Botticelli's masterpiece* (N.Y.: Abrams, 1986).

⁵ Gombrich insisted early on that sound methodology, and any hope of interpretive tact, requires close attention to the question of genre and contemporary conventions of decorum. On this general subject see now the essays assembled in F. Ames-Lewis et al., ed., *Decorum in Renaissance narrative art* (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1992).

⁶ Bredekamp, *Primavera*, is an exception, arguing that Botticelli was, together with his patron, capable of conceiving "his independent personification of Spring ... without further assistance" (p.61)

⁷ See F. Ames-Lewis, *The intellectual life of the early Renaissance artist* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 2000) for a thoughtful study of the early Renaissance artist's intellectual engagement with his craft.

mise in stampa, dietro al quale consumò dimolto tempo: per il che non lavorando, fu cagione di infiniti disordini alla vita sua.”⁸ This has been charitably translated as: “being a man of inquiring mind, he made a commentary on part of Dante, illustrated the Inferno, and printed it; on which he wasted much of his time, bringing infinite disorder into his life by neglecting his work.”⁹ Horne rendered the introductory phrase, “per essere persona sofisticata,” in a similarly genteel way, as “being of a restless turn of mind.”¹⁰ But in context, it would be more faithful to Vasari’s judgemental tone to adopt Lightbown’s version: Botticelli, Vasari wishes us to realize, was “a person of sophistical mind.”¹¹

That Botticelli literally wrote a “commentary” on even a “part” of Dante nobody seriously believes today, though it is noteworthy that in the second edition of his *Lives* (1568) Vasari puts the same accusation into the mouth of one of the painter’s friends. Facetiously and anonymously accused by Botticelli of heresy, his friend, upon learning the identity of his accuser, replies: “He [Botticelli] is the heretic, since without a scrap of learning, and scarcely knowing how to read, he plays the commentator to Dante and takes his name in vain?”¹² Vasari’s words prompted Kenneth Clark, writing twenty-five years ago, to remark that “as usual with Vasari, a kind of general truth transcends his errors of detail. There is no doubt that for at least twenty years Botticelli was obsessed by the study of Dante.”¹³ And in fact we have abundant independent evidence of Botticelli’s deep and abiding interest in Dante, which he shared with several of his fellow artists, especially Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the Sangallos.¹⁴ One of Vasari’s more reliable

⁸ G. Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Paola Barocchi and Rosanna Bettarini, 6v. (text and commentary vols.) (Florence: Sansoni, 1966-87) (henceforth *Vite*), III, p.516. The text is identical in both the first (1550) and second (1568) editions.

⁹ G. Vasari, *Lives of the painters, sculptors, and architects*. Trans. by Gaston Du C. de Vere; now handily available with an introd. and notes by David Ekserdjian, 2v. (N.Y.: Knopf, 1996) (Everyman’s library) (henceforth *Lives*), I, p.538.

¹⁰ Horne, *Botticelli*, p.76.

¹¹ Lightbown, *Botticelli*, I, 56, adding that “Vasari’s description of Botticelli as ‘sophistical’ appears to imply that Botticelli had a speculative, curious, searching intellect, one which in the judgement of some was over-subtle and over-confident” (p.57-58).

¹² Vasari, *Lives*, I, p.541; “e bene è egli eretico, poi che senza lettere comenta Dante e mentova il suo nome invano” (*Vite*, III, p.519).

¹³ K. Clark, *Drawings by Sandro Botticelli for Dante’s Divine Comedy after the originals in the Berlin Museums and the Vatican* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1976), Introduction, p.8. A. Parronchi, in his important article, “Come gli artisti leggevano Dante,” *Studi danteschi* 43 (1966): 97-134, speaks similarly of “una vera ossessione” (p.120). Lightbown, I, p.56, writes similarly that “throughout his life Botticelli spent much of his leisure working out a visual commentary to the poem,” and it seems likely that in oral tradition that “visual commentary” gradually became the written “commentary” of Vasari’s accounts.

¹⁴ For Botticelli’s relation to Dante see, amid a vast literature, Horne, *Botticelli*, p.189-255, and Lightbown, *Botticelli*, I, p.147-205 (with bibliography). Significant monographs include L. Donati, *Il Botticelli e le prime illustrazioni della Divina Commedia* (Florence: Olschki, 1962), and A. Parronchi, *Botticelli fra Dante e Petrarca* (Florence: Nardini, 1985), the latter proposing that Botticelli’s illustrations of Dante, discussed below, were related to a project for the interior decoration of the Duomo in Florence, a proposal first advanced in the author’s “Come gli artisti leggevano Dante,” and later summarized in C. Gizzi, ed., *Botticelli e Dante* (Milano: Electa, 1990), a volume that contains several significant essays, as does H.-T. Schulze Altcapenberg, ed., *Sandro Botticelli: the drawings for Dante’s Divine Comedy* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2001; also available in Italian and German eds.). For Dante and Renaissance artists in general, see especially Parronchi, “Come gli artisti leggevano Dante,” passim; André Chastel, *Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique*, 3d ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), p.106-20; D. Parker, ed. “Visibile parlare: Dante and the art of the Italian Renaissance,” an entire

contemporary sources, the so-called Anonimo Magliabechiano, relates similarly that Botticelli “painted and worked with stories a Dante on vellum, for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici, which was held to be a marvelous thing.”¹⁵ The Anonimo is thought to be referring to the magnificent set of 92 drawings illustrating the *Divine Comedy*, today divided between the Berlin Museums (85 drawings) and the Vatican Library (7 drawings), and usually dated to the 1490s.¹⁶ Horne observed early on that these drawings “show an acquaintance with the poem, which would have been remarkable in any scholar of his day.”¹⁷

Returning to Vasari’s account, Botticelli’s surviving Dante illustrations were never printed, neither are they confined to the Inferno. Accordingly, Vasari’s unambiguous assertion that Botticelli “illustrated the Inferno, and printed it” is usually taken to refer to a much earlier campaign of Dante illustration, undertaken in the late 1470s. For in the fall of 1481, just as Botticelli was called by Pope Sixtus IV to work on the interior decoration of the Sistine Chapel in the company of Pietro Perugino, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Cosimo Rosselli, and Luca Signorelli, the first Florentine edition of the *Divina Commedia* was printed by Nicolo di Lorenzo della Magna, a deluxe production with an elaborate commentary by the dean of Quattrocento Dante exegetes, professor of poetry and rhetoric at the Studio Fiorentino, the great humanist Cristoforo Landino.¹⁸ A series of engravings illustrating the early cantos of the Inferno was provided, probably, by the goldsmith Baccio Baldini. We know less than we could wish about the genesis of the Landino Dante, but Baldini’s uninspired prints are certainly Botticellesque in all but the mediocrity of their execution, and being confined to the Inferno answer to Vasari’s description.¹⁹ Moreover, Vasari’s statement that Botticelli executed his Dante illustrations “immediately” after his return from Rome, though clearly inaccurate, suggests that his labor was connected with the Landino Dante. For this reason, most Botticelli scholars agree that the painter probably provided the lost models for the Baldini prints. Only nineteen prints, illustrating the first cantos of the Inferno, seem to have been engraved. Probably, Botticelli’s call to Rome interrupted work on the project. While all known copies have blank spaces where the illustrations were intended to go, few have more than two or three illustrations, and the copy printed on vellum and presented by Landino to the Florentine Signoria dispensed with the prints altogether.

volume of *Lectura dantis* 22-23 (Spring/Fall 1998); and Sabbatino, P., ed. *Dante e il Rinascimento: rassegna bibliografica e studi in onore di Aldo Vallone* (Firenze: Olschki, 1994).

¹⁵ *Il codice magliabechiano cl.xvii. 17*, ed. C. Frey (Berlin, 1892), reprinted Farnborough: Gregg, 1969, p.90. Cited in Horne’s trans., *Botticelli*, p.190.

¹⁶ Registered by M. Colomb de Batines, *Bibliografia dantesca* (Prato: Tip. Aldina, 1845-46), II, p.174. A superb facsimile ed. by P. Dreyer, *Dantes Divina Commedia mit den Illustrationen von Sandro Botticelli Reg. Lat. 1896* (Zurich: Belser, 1986). Clark’s ed. (above) remains more readily available. Lightbown, I, p.148, has not persuaded scholars that the Anonimo is referring to a lost set of drawings and that the Berlin-Vatican drawings reflect only Botticelli’s personal engagement with Dante.

¹⁷ Horne, *Botticelli*, p.251.

¹⁸ For the Landino Dante see : L. Hain, *Repertorium bibliographicum*, 2v. (Milan: Görlich, 1948), no.5946; Colomb de Batines, I, p.36ff.; G. Mambelli, *Gli annali delle edizioni dantesche* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1931), p.17ff.

¹⁹ For the engravings see especially A.M. Hind, *Early Italian engraving*, 7v. (London: Quaritch, 1938-48), I, p.99ff.

In sum, Botticelli's "obsession" with Dante probably took root in the course of the 1470s,²⁰ evolving in tandem with a commission to provide illustrations for the famous Landino Dante, and then flowered independently into a twenty-year engagement with the poem, culminating in the extensive set of drawings now in Berlin and Rome.

From Purgatory to the *Primavera*?

Botticelli scholars long assumed — and most still assume — that the *Primavera*, like the Landino Dante, was commissioned as well as executed during the course of the late 1470s or, at the latest, the early 1480s. In the early 16th century, Vasari saw the painting in the suburban villa at Castello previously the property of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici (1464-1503), scion of the younger branch of the Medici family and cousin and ward of Lorenzo the Magnificent — the same young man who, judging from the testimony of the Anonimo Magliabechiano, later commissioned Botticelli's surviving set of Dante illustrations. The villa at Castello was remodeled in the late 1470s for the younger Lorenzo, and accordingly scholars long assumed that the *Primavera* was commissioned in connection with the redecoration of the villa. However, inventories of the Medici family properties, discovered and published in the 1970s, suggest that the painting in fact hung initially above a sofa bed (*lettuccio*) on the first floor of his *urban* Florentine residence, on the Via Larga (now Cavour), and not at his country estate.²¹ Horst Bredekamp has recently emphasized that the evidence of these inventories calls traditional assumptions about the date of the commission into question. He further proposes that the painting belongs on stylistic grounds to the mid-1480s, and especially that Botticelli's precise classicizing imagery betrays his study of an ensemble of antiquities the artist can only have encountered during his Sistine sojourn.²² Michael Rohlmann, by contrast, has recently marshaled contextual evidence suggesting that the *Primavera* was, as has indeed often been suspected, 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 and has the virtue of

²⁰ Horne, *Botticelli*, p.76f., writes that "already in 1481, Botticelli had spent no little time over the study of Dante: and, perhaps, in the phrase of his father's 'Denunzia' [tax statement] returned in 1480, 'lavora in casa quando evolve' [he works at home when he has a will], we may detect an allusion to this time of apparent idleness, to the days and weeks squandered in this vain study, as his family no doubt thought, and as Vasari, who seems to preserve a tradition of the opinion then current in the workshops, records" (bracketed comments added). For a recent discussion of "Le due serie di disegni del Botticelli per la *Commedia*," see P. Bellini's essay with that title in Gizzi, *Botticelli e Dante*, p.41-50.

²¹ For the inventories see J. Shearman, "The collections of the younger branch of the Medici," *Burlington magazine* 117 (January 1975): 12-25, and W. Smith, "On the original location of the *Primavera*," *Art bulletin* 57 (March 1975): 31-40. R. Cocks, "Botticelli's *Primavera*: the myth of Medici patronage," *Apollo* 136 (1992): 233-38, uniquely doubts that the young Medici had anything to do with the painting.

²² Bredekamp, *Primavera*, p.22ff. argues that during his Roman sojourn, Botticelli studied closely the antiquities assembled and displayed in the late Quattrocento in the del Bufalo collection, and that he derived direct visual inspiration for the figural imagery of the *Primavera* from this study. His argument rests upon the persuasive evidence adduced by H. Wrede, *Der Antikengarten der del Bufalo bei der Fontana Trevi* (Mainz: Zabern, 1982) (*Trierer Winckelmannprogramme*, 4), esp. p.17-18.

situating the *Primavera* within a generic interpretive context of the kind we have so far lacked.²³ 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.²⁴ And Botticelli's Roman sojourn, and with it his first exposure to the Eternal City's antiquities, might in turn have fundamentally shaped the *Primavera*'s imagery, as Bredekamp proposes.²⁵

Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici seems to have shared Botticelli's keen and abiding interest in Dante. As noted, the wealthy young Medici is commonly assumed, on the basis of the Anonimo's explicit contemporary testimony, to have commissioned Botticelli's surviving Dante drawings.²⁶ And Lightbown has suggested that he already subsidized the publication of the Landino Dante of 1481.²⁷ If Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco did cultivate, along with Botticelli, such an early interest in Dante, we should not be entirely surprised to find signs of that shared engagement in the *Primavera*. On the other hand, if Bredekamp is right that the *Primavera* dates from the mid-1480s, that makes it still more likely that Botticelli's patron, by then an adult, had come to share the artist's interest in Dante by the time the *Primavera* was commissioned, since such a late date would place the painting roughly within the timeframe generally associated with Botticelli's work on his surviving Dante drawings.

That, at the very least, Botticelli himself *eventually* came, in his own expressive imagination, to associate his *Primavera* with Dante is as nearly demonstrable as such things can ever be. Scarcely anyone who has studied Botticelli's surviving illustrations in Berlin and Rome has failed to note the kinship in style, imagery, and sensibility between his evocative renderings of the Earthly Paradise (*paradiso terrestre*) (fig. 2), as described in the final cantos of the *Purgatorio*, and the *Primavera*. Adolfo Venturi observed the kinship eighty years ago, writing that "the *Primavera* ... come[s] to mind before this exquisite dream, which with delicate lines, incised subtly as with a diamond on crystal, forms, with poetic license, the forest, in Dante 'dense and living'."²⁸ Yves Batard went

²³ M. Rohlmann, "Botticelli's 'Primavera'," seconded by Zöllner, "Quellen," *passim*.

²⁴ Zöllner, "Quellen," p.134 (with references), notes that it was not unusual for wedding preparations to take as much as two years, that in this instance the first documentary evidence of a proposal dates from as early as October 1480, and that the date of a wedding commission did not necessarily coincide closely with the wedding date.

²⁵ The recent restoration of the *Primavera* shows that the painting has very few pentimenti indeed and that the painter executed it with great confidence once his design was sketched out (Baldini, *Primavera*, p.40f.). This suggests a lengthy preliminary study of the details of its imagery and composition, a gestation period that might well have occurred in Rome.

²⁶ Horne, *Botticelli*, p.51.

²⁷ Lightbown, I, p.56, states, without providing a documentary source, that "Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, the Magnifico's cousin, who was ... Botticelli's greatest and most faithful patron, paid the cost of printing and publishing Landino's *Dante*, a fact which may explain Botticelli's connection with its illustrations." Jane Roberts makes the same assertion in her contribution to the exhibition catalog *Leonardo and Venice* (Milan: Bompiani, 1992), p.292.

²⁸ A. Venturi, *Il Botticelli interprete di Dante* (Florence: Le Monier, 1921), p.99.

still further thirty years later, asking, partly rhetorically: Could the figure of Flora in the *Primavera*, “Botticelli’s florid dancer,” already be inspired by Dante?²⁹

Among contemporary writers, Paul Barolsky deserves great credit for taking this possibility more seriously than any other scholar. In a series of perceptive essays,³⁰ he has drawn attention to the striking similarities between Botticelli’s painting and Dante’s description of the Earthly Paradise.

Cantos xxvii-xxxi of the *Purgatorio* represent a distinct and enchanting pastoral interlude in Dante’s narrative, in which the barren wasteland of the *Inferno* and Mt. Purgatory yields, suddenly, to the Earthly Paradise’s sylvan setting of lush verdure, flowing waters, and gentle resonant breezes. This shift in mood and setting is heralded in Canto xxvii, when Dante, having passed through the purifying wall of fire, is overcome by “sleep, which often knows the news before the event” (“il sonno che sovente, anzi che ‘l fatto sia, sa le novelle”). At dawn the poet experiences a prophetic dream that anticipates in its imagery his imminent arrival in the Earthly Paradise:

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 fiori; 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 ...) (*Purg.* xxvii, 94-99)³¹

This “lady young and beautiful” identifies herself as the biblical Leah and introduces her silent companion as her sister Rachel, who sits motionless in the grass before a mirror. In this, one of Dante’s several “prophetic morning dreams,”³² 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 the resident spirit of that other Eden. Landino, in his commentary, stresses the importance of Dante’s dream

²⁹ Y. Batard, *Dante, Minerve et Apollon: les images de la Divine Comedie* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1952), p.431, n.9. Batard does not take up this question in *Les dessins de Sandro Botticelli pour la Divine Comedie* (Paris: Parron, 1952).

³⁰ P. Barolsky, “Botticelli’s *Primavera* and the tradition of Dante,” *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* 52 (1983): 1-6; “Botticelli’s *Primavera* as an allegory of its own creation,” *Source: notes in the history of art* 13, no.3 (spring 1994): 14-19; “The ethereal voluptas of Botticelli,” previously cited; “Botticelli’s *Primavera* and the origins of the elegiac in Italian renaissance painting” (with Anne Barriaault), *Gazette des beaux-arts* 128 (September 1996): 63-70; “Matilda’s hermeneutics,” *Lectura dantis* 22-23 (spring/fall 1998): 199-202; *Walter Pater’s Renaissance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), Chapter 13, “Botticelli and the eternal vision of art” (incorporating portions of the first article above).

³¹ Dante is cited here in the accessible ed. and (prose) trans. of Charles Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

³² C. Speroni, “Dante’s prophetic morning dreams,” *Studies in philology* 45 (1981): 50-59.

of Leah and Rachel, which he insists is not a mere dream but a “vision” (*visione*), for Dante’s entire Earthly Paradise narrative.³³

The following day, Dante encounters the maiden Matelda, singing as she gathers flowers among the trees, meadows, and waters of the Earthly Paradise. In response to the poet’s query, Matelda explains the nature of this place, where flowers bloom without seed and waters need no replenishing. She further explains that this is — “perhaps” — the very Golden Age dreamed of by the poets of antiquity:

Quelli ch’anticamente poetaro
l’età de l’oro e suo stato felice,
forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.
Qui fu innocente l’umana radice;
qui primavera sempre e ogne frutto;
nettare è questo di che ciascun dice.

(They who in olden times sang of the Age of Gold and its happy state perhaps in Parnassus dreamed of this place. Here the root of mankind was innocent; here is always spring, and every fruit; this is the nectar of which each tells) (Purg. xxviii, 139-144)

Dante commentators ever since the Renaissance have observed that, in rendering the Earthly Paradise, Dante draws on the very classical poets he invokes expressly here. Landino, always alert in his commentary to Dante’s classical literary sources, accordingly characterizes the Earthly Paradise as a “loco amenissima,” modeled closely and consciously on the classical *locus amoenus* or pastoral pleasance.

Envisioning Dante’s “divina foresta, spessa e viva,” we moderns are hard put *not* to think of Botticelli’s painting, which has helped define our very image of the pastoral in art. But the kinship between Dante’s imagery and Botticelli’s is not confined to a common — and entirely conventional — sylvan setting. As we have seen, Dante’s dream or “vision” of Leah in Canto xxvii, in which he beholds “a lady young and beautiful,” becomes a reality in the following canto with the first appearance of Matelda:

... e là m’apparve, sì com’ elli appare
subitamente cosa che disvia
per meraviglia tutto altro pensare,
una donna soletta che si gia
e cantanto e scegliendo fior da fiore
ond’ era pinta tutta la sua via.

(... and there appeared to me there, as appears of a sudden a thing that for wonder drives away every other thought, a lady all alone, who went singing and culling flower from flower, with which all her path was painted) (Purg. xxviii, 37-42).

³³ Landino, *Comento*, p.1447, with reference to Purg. xxvii, 94-96. All references to Landino’s commentary on Dante are based on P. Procaccioli’s admirable new critical ed.: Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia*, 4v., continuously paginated (Roma: Salerno, 2001) (Edizione nazionale dei commenti danteschi, 28) (henceforth Landino, *Comento*). This ed. also conveniently reproduces (following p.216) Baldini’s engravings from the copy in the Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence (Ed. Rare 691).

Do not the goddesses in the *Primavera* — the three dancing Graces; Chloris, fleeing the embrace of Zephyr even as she is transformed by his warm breath into Flora; and Venus, presiding over the scene — inevitably come to mind upon hearing Dante’s description of Matelda? Their path, too, is “painted” with flowers — more than forty kinds, according to one scholar’s botanical tabulation.³⁴ And though none of them culls flowers, Chloris is transformed before our eyes into the very goddess Flora herself. As Barolsky observes, even Dante’s “soave vento,” the sweet breeze that causes the forest to sing, blows caressingly through the painting³⁵ — thereby justifying, one might add, the fluttering draperies, flowing hair, and other “animated accessories” (*bewegtes Beiwerk*) that, as Warburg first observed, came to be so characteristic of Botticelli’s, and the late Quattrocento’s, style *all’antica*.

The striking similarities between Botticelli’s surviving drawings of Dante’s Earthly Paradise and the *Primavera* might only reflect the fact that over many years Botticelli came, like most of us, to envision Dante’s Earthly Paradise in light of his own early “selva antica,” and surely they do demonstrate that if nothing else. But Barolsky, following Batard, has suggested persuasively that the current of inspiration flowed both ways, and that the *Primavera* itself betrays Botticelli’s close and enthusiastic study of Dante.³⁶ In the balance of this article we will try to take this proposition a step further.

Learning from Landino

Like most students of Dante through the centuries, Botticelli and his contemporaries read the *Divina Commedia* with the aid of a scholarly commentary — in this instance, Cristoforo Landino’s. The teacher of Angelo Poliziano and Marsilio Ficino and one of the leading Florentine humanists, Landino (1424-1492) lectured on Dante for perhaps twenty years before finally publishing a magisterial commentary on the poem, the commentary printed, as we have seen, alongside the poem in the first Florentine edition of the *Commedia*, published in 1481 — the very edition for which Botticelli is thought to have provided preliminary drawings. Landino’s commentary immediately preempted the genre; no other Florentine even attempted a commentary on Dante until the mid-16th century, and Landino’s continued to enjoy canonical status throughout the Cinquecento.³⁷

³⁴ Levi d’Ancona, *Botticelli’s Primavera*, p.71ff.

³⁵ Barolsky, “Botticelli’s *Primavera* and the tradition of Dante,” p.4.

³⁶ Barolsky, “Botticelli’s *Primavera*,” *passim*. Even Bredekamp, in proposing a dynastic interpretation of the painting, acknowledges (*Primavera*, p.70f.) not only that Botticelli’s extant drawings of the Earthly Paradise reflect the imagery of the *Primavera*, but that the painting itself already betrays distinct signs of the painter’s “previous preoccupation” with Dante during his work on Landino’s edition.

³⁷ For Landino’s commentary see especially the authoritative study by M. Lentzen, *Studien zur Dante-Exegese Cristoforo Landinos* (Köln: Böhlau, 1979); summary in Lentzen, “Cristoforo Landinos Dantekommentar” in *Der Kommentar in der Renaissance*, ed. A. Buck and O. Herding (Boppard: Bolt, 1975), p.167-89. For a critical ed. of the Proemio to the Landino Dante see Procaccioli’s ed. of the *Comento*, p.219-78; also R. Cardini’s ed. of Landino’s *Scritti critici e teorici*, 2v. (Roma: Bolzau, 1974) (henceforth Landino, *Scritti*), I, p.97-164. Landino’s oration delivered, along with the presentation copy of his Dante edition, to the Signoria is available in Procaccioli’s ed. of the *Comento* as well as in Lentzen, “Die Oratione di messere Cristoforo Landino fiorentino havuta alla illustrissima Signoria Fiorentina quando presentò el comento suo di Dante,” *Romanische Forschungen* 80 (1968): 530-39 and in Lentzen,

In his several extensive commentaries on the poets, Landino adopted two distinct but overlapping interpretive models.³⁸ As a humanist, he excelled in philological, linguistic, rhetorical, and stylistic analysis, an approach that characterizes his commentaries on Persius (1462), Juvenal (1462), Horace (1482), and Virgil (1488). In other works, however, and most especially in his Dante commentary, Landino sought, above all, to elucidate for his fellow Florentines the esoteric, philosophical sense of the text, by means of an allegorical method deeply indebted to Florentine Renaissance Neoplatonism. Early on, Landino had encouraged his pupil Ficino to undertake his first Platonic composition, the lost *Institutiones ad Platoniam disciplinam* of 1456, which Ficino ultimately dedicated to Landino.³⁹ Eventually, the teacher became the pupil, Landino emerging as one of the primary proponents and popularizers of the Platonic revival inaugurated by Ficino. In this role, Landino tailored Ficino's Neoplatonism to fit his own critical and philosophical agenda. Characteristically, Landino incorporated in the Proemio to the 1481 Dante a congratulatory epistle from Ficino, in which the philosopher toasts his former teacher's accomplishment and the exiled poet's glorious return to Florence.⁴⁰

The defining philosophical theme of Landino's Dante commentary is one that engaged Landino throughout his career: the soul's moral and spiritual pilgrimage from what Landino called, emulating the ancients, the *vita voluptuosa*, through the *vita activa*, to the *vita contemplativa*. This key theme was already elaborated in Landino's reading of the *Aeneid*, first presented in Books III and IV of his *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, composed around 1472 and published in 1480.⁴¹ And while Landino subjugated his interest in this theme to a more strictly philological treatment of the *Aeneid* in his full-length commentary (1488), he made it a keystone of his commentary on Dante.

ed., *Reden Cristoforo Landinos* (Munich: Fink, 1974), p.36-45. The standard biographical source on Landino remains A.M. Bandini, *Specimen literaturae florentinae saeculi XV ...*, 2v. (Florence, 1747-1751). For a now somewhat dated summary of the state of research on Landino, see Lentzen, "Zum gegenwärtigen Stand der Landino-Forschung," *Wolfenbütteler Renaissance Mitteilungen* 5 (1981): 92-100, and his *Studien*, p.1-26. See also C. Dionisotti in *Enciclopedia dantesca* (Rome, 1971), III, p.566-68, s.v. "Landino." On the fortune of the Landino Dante, see J.V. de Pina Martins, "À propos du commentaire de la 'Divine Comédie' par Landino dans les éditions du XVe et du XVIe siècles," in *Les cultures iberiques en devenir: essais publiés en hommage à la memoire de Marcel Bataillon (1895-1977)* (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1979), p.261-77.

³⁸ On Landino's dual approach in his commentaries see C. Kallendorf, "Cristoforo Landino's Aeneid and the humanist critical tradition," *Renaissance quarterly* 36 (1983): 519-46. On Landino and poetry generally see A. Buck, "Dichtung und Dichter beim Cristoforo Landino: ein Beitrag zur Dichtungslehre des italienischen Humanismus," *Romanische Forschungen* 58/59 (1947): 233-46; R. Cardini, *La critica del Landino* (Florence: Sansoni, 1973); M. di Cesare, "Cristoforo Landino on the name and nature of poetry: the critic as hero," *Chaucer review* 21 (1986): 155-81.

³⁹ See A. Field, "Cristoforo Landino's first lectures on Dante," *Renaissance quarterly* 39 (1986):16-48.

⁴⁰ Landino, *Comento*, p. 268f.; also in Landino, *Scritti*, I, p.153f.

⁴¹ Landino lectured on Virgil as early as 1462/63. See Field, "A manuscript of Cristoforo Landino's first lectures on Virgil, 1462-63," *Renaissance quarterly* 31 (1978): 17-20. On the date of the *Disputationes*, see P. Lohe, "Die Datierung der 'Disputationes Camaldulenses' des Cristoforo Landino," *Rinascimento* 9 (1969): 291-99, and his introd. to his critical ed.: P. Lohe, ed. *Disputationes Camaldulenses* (Florence: Sansoni, 1980). Thomas Stahel has translated Books III and IV into English in his dissertation: *Cristoforo Landino's allegorization of the Aeneid: Books III and IV of the Disputationes Camaldulenses* (Johns Hopkins, 1968). For comment see E. Müller-Bochat, *Leon Batista Alberti und die Vergil-Deutung der Disputationes Camaldulenses: zur allegorischen Dichter-Erklärung bei Cristoforo Landino* (Krefeld: Scherpe, 1968); see also Kallendorf, "Cristoforo Landino's Aeneid," p.525.

Landino himself obviously wished readers of his Dante commentary to see his previous allegorical reading of the *Aeneid* as a prelude to his interpretation of the *Divina Commedia*:

Ora perché havevo novellamente interpretato, et alle latine lettere mandato l'allegorico senseo della virgiliana Eneide, guidicai non dovere essere inutile a miei cittadini, né ingiocondo, se con quanto potessi maggiore studio et industria similmente invenstigassi gl'arcani et occulti ma al tutto divinissimi sensi della *Comedia* del fiorentino poeta Danthe Alighieri; et chome el latino poeta in latina lingua havevo expresso, chosé el toscano in toscana interpretassi.⁴²

Now because I had recently interpreted, and rendered in Latin, the allegorical meaning of Virgil's *Aeneid*, I judged that it would not be useless to my fellow citizens, nor unpleasant, if I similarly investigated, with further study and effort, the arcane and occult but supremely divine meanings of the *Comedia* of the Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri; and as I expressed the Latin poet in Latin, so now I would interpret the Tuscan poet in the Tuscan language.

Thus the Proemio to Landino's Dante commentary. In the commentary itself, Dante, accordingly, assumes the role previously played by Aeneas, and his journey, too, is said to symbolize the soul's moral and spiritual pilgrimage (Aeneas' "itinerarium animae") from the knowledge of sin in the Inferno, through purification in the Purgatorio, to the "contemplatio rerum divinarum" in the Paradiso. Landino consistently traces this pilgrimage across recurring tracks of sylvan imagery, interpreting Dante's "selva oscura" at the beginning of the poem as an allegory of the *vita voluptuosa* and the Earthly Paradise at the end of the Purgatorio as the setting for the perfected *vita activa*. Finally, Dante ascends to the *vita contemplativa* in the Paradiso, receiving the vision of divine perfection.

As Landino proudly observes, his commentary on Dante, unlike his previous commentaries on the poets, is composed in the vernacular. One cannot overemphasize the importance of this gesture. As Arthur Field has remarked, "Landino's 1481 commentary on Dante marked the high point of Florentine Quattrocento Neoplatonism in its *volgare* expression"; and he adds that "Platonism was indeed available through Dante to every Florentine who was able to read and who could afford to buy a book."⁴³ That, incidentally, seems to have been true of quite a few Florentines, since the Landino Dante was issued in a first edition of 1200 copies.⁴⁴ Field observes further that "Florentine Platonism, however, had already embraced Dante for at least two decades, from the time of Landino's first lectures on the Divine Comedy."⁴⁵ For in fact Landino's allegorical Dante commentary was the culmination of a prolonged, public engagement with the text

⁴² Landino, *Comento*, p.219-20 (=Proemio). On the relation of the Dante commentary to Landino's reading of the *Aeneid* in the Disputationes, see especially Lentzen, *Studien*, p.137-57. All translations from Landino are my own.

⁴³ Field, "Cristoforo Landino's first lectures on Dante," p.37.

⁴⁴ Lentzen, *Studien*, p.34.

⁴⁵ Field, "Cristoforo Landino's first lectures on Dante," p.38.

and its philosophical meaning.⁴⁶ Landino's fellow Florentines, Botticelli and his young patron among them, did not have to wait until 1481 to become familiar with his allegorical reading of the *Commedia*.

Returning to Botticelli's *Primavera* and its relationship to Dante's Earthly Paradise, what "arcani et occulti ma al tutto divinissimi sensi", what "arcane and occult but supremely divine meanings," does Landino discover in Dante's account of the Earthly Paradise? Landino's reading of this crucial episode depends fundamentally upon his understanding of Dante's narrative technique. Landino observes that the poet's entry into the Earthly Paradise and his encounter with Matelda were prophetically foreshadowed in the poet's "vision" of Leah and Rachel, in which, as we have seen, he beholds Leah "going through a meadow gathering flowers and singing," while her sister sits motionless before a mirror (Purg. xxvii, 98f.) In medieval biblical exegesis as in previous Dante commentaries, Leah and Rachel were invariably regarded as types of the active and contemplative lives. Dante invites this interpretation when he has Leah explain that "she with seeing, I with doing am satisfied" ("lei lo vedere, e me l'ovrare appaga") (Purg. xxvii, 107f.). Landino takes occasion several times to affirm and expand upon this conventional interpretation, particularly in his long discussion of Rachel at Inferno ii, 100ff.⁴⁷ Returning to this theme in connection with the dream of Leah in the Purgatorio, Landino again contrasts the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, harkening back to his previous discussion:

... ma in questo luogo stimo ponga Lya per dinotare che l'huomo già purgato d' vittii s'exerciti nel paradiso terrestre, cioè nella mortale vita, nella vita activa, secondo le virtù civili, et secondo la christiana religione, in forma che essendo stato buono cittadino in questa Hierusalem città terrena, possiamo salire a Hierusalem città superna, dove non è Lya ma Rachel, idest la vita contemplativa....⁴⁸

... but in this place, I submit, he situates Leah to indicate that man, purged of vices, exercises himself in the earthly paradise, that is, in mortal life, in the *vita activa*, in accordance with civic virtue and according to the Christian religion, in such a way that having been a good citizen of this earthly Jerusalem, we can ascend to the heavenly Jerusalem, where we find not Leah but Rachel, that is the *vita contemplativa*....

Landino thus explicitly identifies the Earthly Paradise with the *vita activa*,⁴⁹ and he goes on to explain to the reader that Matelda, the spirit of the place, is herself the perfect embodiment of the *vita activa*, as anticipated in the poet's vision of Leah:

⁴⁶ Landino himself writes in his dedicatory Orazione alla Signoria, that he had lectured on Dante "for many years": "... perche le parole non commesse alla lettere presto volano de' pecti umani e spesso nessuno vestigio di sé lasciano, tentai quelle medesime sententie mandare alle lettere, le quali avevo molti anni nel vostro celeberrimo gymnasio a voce via expresso (*Comento*, p.110; Landino, *Scritti*, I, p.171).

⁴⁷ Landino, *Comento*, p.364f.

⁴⁸ Landino, *Comento*, p.1447, with reference to Purg. xxvii, 91-108.

⁴⁹ See Lentzen, *Studien*, p.109: "These observations are of great importance in so far as the location of the 'vita activa' is identified with the Earthly Paradise" (translations from Lentzen are my own).

Per questa donna intende la vita activa et chiamala Mathelda.... Adunque ... in questo principio del paradiso delle delitie, nel quale costituisce la vita activa, finge trovare Mathelda, la quale in quella congiunse le virtù civile con la vera religione christiana. Pone che sia sola non perché la vita activa sia in solitudine, ma per dimostrare, che anchora in queste è disbisogno assidua meditatione....⁵⁰

By this lady he means the vita activa and he calls her Matelda.... Thus ... at the beginning of the paradise of delights, in which he situates the vita activa, he has us find Matelda, in whom are conjoined civic virtue and the true Christian religion. He says she is alone not because the vita activa is solitary, but to show that in this, too, there is need of assiduous meditation....

In this passage, Landino emphasizes his profound conviction that the perfected *vita activa* is a life in which “civic virtue and the true Christian religion” — that is, the *vita contemplativa*⁵¹ — are conjoined, in a precarious but essential balance that itself demands “assiduous meditation.” Landino clearly believed that a union of the two “forms of life” was essential to moral and civic well-being, and in this passage, as no doubt in his public lectures on Dante over the preceding two decades, he forcefully defines his stance in a philosophical debate that engaged Renaissance humanists for decades.⁵² Yet Landino remains fully mindful that even this Earthly Paradise, in which civic virtue and the contemplative life are harmoniously united, is ultimately no more, but also no less, than an enchanting episode on the soul’s pilgrimage. For this fugitive moment must ultimately yield to the soul’s pursuit of “the heavenly Jerusalem, where we find not Leah but Rachel, that is the *vita contemplativa*” — much as Matelda yields to Beatrice in the Paradiso.

One of the few things Botticelli scholars do generally agree about when it comes to the *Primavera* is that, despite its characteristically episodic composition, a significant visual syntax defines the sequence of Botticelli’s figures and their unorthodox right-to-left movement.⁵³ An episode of unabashed erotic pursuit at the right yields, under the celestial influence of Venus, to a scene of contemplation at the left, as Mercury gazes up at the heavens, dispersing, with his caduceus, tiny wisps of mist that linger in the treetops and obscure his view. With Landino’s interpretation of the Earthly Paradise fresh in our minds, it is tempting to see in the *Primavera* precisely what Landino beheld in Dante’s Earthly Paradise: an allegory of the soul’s pilgrimage from the *vita voluptuosa* to the *vita*

⁵⁰ Landino, *Comento*, p.1458f., with reference to Purg. xxviii, 34-42.

⁵¹ Lentzen (p.109) comments on this crucial passage: “By the ‘vera religione christiana’ is to be understood a Christianized ‘contemplatio rerum divinarum.’ Thus Matelda, as a kind of synthesis of Leah and Rachel, symbolizes the harmonious union of the two forms of life,” the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.

⁵² On Landino, the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, see Lentzen, *Studien*, p.94-110; E. Garin, “The problem of the relation between action and contemplation in Cristoforo Landino,” in his *Italian humanism: philosophy and civic life in the Renaissance* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1965), p.84-88. Book I of the *Disputationes* is devoted to this theme, the defense of contemplation being undertaken by Alberti. It is a recurrent motif in Landino’s works. For its place in Quattrocento humanist thought, see F. Schalk, “Il tema della ‘vita activa’ e della ‘vita contemplativa’ nell’umanesimo italiano,” in E. Castelli, ed., *Umanesimo e scienza politica* (Atti del congresso internazionale di studi umanistici, Rome-Florence, 1949 (Milan: Marzorati, 1951), p.559-66.

⁵³ Probably a product of the architectural placement of the painting, in which the beholder’s eye took the painting in progressively, from right to left.

contemplativa. And if Dante formulates his allegory in terms of a pastoral interlude set in a *paradiso terrestre* embodying, Landino tells us, the perfected *vita activa*, surely the same might be said of Botticelli's *Primavera*, itself a variation *all'antica* on the same pastoral theme. Moreover, Landino, as we shall see, expressly associates Dante's Earthly Paradise episode with Venus, pronouncing that "celestial Venus" has guided Dante throughout his pilgrimage, finally leading him to the Earthly Paradise. In the *Primavera*, of course, Dante's "arcane and occult but above all most divine meaning" is rendered explicit in the figure and gesture of Botticelli's Venus.

Seeing the *Primavera* as a visual allegory of the soul's passage from the *vita voluptuosa*, through the *vita activa*, to the *vita contemplativa* helps explain the painting's curiously episodic narrative structure. It also allows us to see the *Primavera* not as *sui generis* but as resonating with a central theme in Quattrocento moral philosophy. As a painted allegory, the *Primavera* simultaneously alludes, in ways Botticelli's circle would have appreciated, by its imagery and poetics to Florence's own greatest poem and poet, welcomed back from exile in 1481 through the vehicle of a glorious printed edition, and also to the key role played in this act of repatriation by Cristoforo Landino. Finally, Botticelli's floral allegory surely alludes, too, as Bredekamp has suggested, to Florence itself,⁵⁴ an allusion we should see as advancing that city as the setting for a new, perfected *vita activa*, a new *paradiso terrestre*.

"Venere celeste lo conduca"

But if the *Primavera* is a visual variation on a theme from Dante, inspired by Landino's interpretation of the Earthly Paradise episode, the question remains why Botticelli elected to present this variation *all'antica*, with a distinctive cast of classical deities. The Landino Dante again points to an answer. Cantos xxvii-xxviii of the *Purgatorio* are, as is well known, rich with allusions to classical mythology. These allusions are part and parcel of Dante's invocation and imitation of the poets of antiquity in these very cantos. They also supply Landino, in his commentary, with further opportunities to assimilate Dante to Virgil, Christianity to Antiquity, and, especially, Dante's "vera religione christiana" to the "divine meanings" of ancient mythology. Finally, these literary allusions echo, in suggestive ways, the *Primavera*'s particular pantheon.

Venus, who of course is the central figure in Botticelli's *Primavera*, is mentioned or alluded to three times, at critical junctures in the "canti di Matelda"; but according to Landino, the goddess is present *throughout* Dante's pilgrimage. Dante's dream or "vision" of Leah occurs, as we have seen, at dawn, "in the hour when [Venus] Cytherea, who seems always burning with the fire of love, first shone on the mountain from the east." Landino, closely attentive to Dante's narrative devices, notes in this connection that Venus was *also* in the ascendent when Dante first entered Purgatory. Referring the reader back to his commentary on Purgatory i, he takes this rhetorical structure as a powerful confirmation that it is "celestial Venus" who leads the poet on his spiritual pilgrimage. "In questo, Dante dimostra, che Venere celeste lo conduca."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Bredekamp, *Primavera*.

⁵⁵ Landino, *Comento*, p.1045, with reference to Purg. i, 19-21.

That Venus leads Dante on his pilgrimage is, to Landino, amply confirmed by Dante's subsequent references to the goddess. In Canto xxviii, when Dante first beholds Matelda, he addresses her as "fair lady, who do warm yourself at love's beams" (*bella donna, che a' raggi d'amore ti scaldi*). Again in the same canto, when Matelda raises her eyes to Dante, the poet says that:

Non credo che splendesse tanto lume
sotto le ciglia a Venere, trafitta
dal figlio fuor di tutto suo costume.

(I do not believe that so great a light shone forth under the eyelids of Venus, transfixed by her son against all his custom) (Purg. xxviii, 64-66)⁵⁶

Dante's first address to Matelda in Canto xxviii contains still further suggestive allusions to classical mythology. He says that the "fair lady" reminds him of Proserpina, seized by Pluto as she gathered flowers with her mother, who thus lost her as she lost the Spring:

Tu mi fai rimembrar dove e qual era
Proserpina nel tempo che perdette
la madre lei, ed ella primavera (Purg. xxviii, 49-51)

The rape of Proserpina is, strikingly, only one of three episodes of erotic pursuit alluded to in connection with Dante's initial encounter with Matelda. And the attendant notion that somewhere Spring abides eternally is also invoked by Dante. "Here Spring is eternal," Matelda says, "*qui primavera sempre*" (Purg. xxviii, 143), echoing Dante's classical literary sources, and Landino duly elaborates, in his commentary on these verses, on the theme of a "*perpetua primavera*."⁵⁷ In this passage as in so many that define the imagery of these cantos, Dante draws directly upon precisely the "antique poets" who, since Warburg, have been invoked to account for the precise classical imagery of the *Primavera*, in this case the scene of erotic pursuit at the right, which seems to be an allegory of the *vita voluptuosa*, and in which the wind-god Zephyr pursues the nymph Chloris, who is transformed before our eyes into the goddess Flora.⁵⁸

This scene is, as we have seen, balanced, at the left, by Botticelli's liminal figure of Mercury, dispelling remnants of mist that linger in the treetops, oblivious to the other characters in the painting. Many scholars have felt that Mercury is somehow miscast among the vernal company of the *Primavera*. While Mercury is not mentioned in the final cantos of the Purgatorio, a metaphor used twice in close succession by Matelda in Canto xxviii should be recalled. Matelda explains the nature of the Earthly Paradise, proposing to "dispel the cloud" from the minds of the two poets, Dante and Virgil

⁵⁶ Landino, *Comento*, p.1461, writes that Dante compares Matelda to Venus – "et *maxime* quando fu accessa dell'amore d'Adone" – in order to evoke the "great splendor" ("*splendore grande*") of Matelda's eyes as she raises them to the poet.

⁵⁷ Landino, *Comento*, p.1469.

⁵⁸ Landino, *Comento*, p.1460, observes that the Rape of Proserpina occurred in a "*prato amenissimo*," and writes that Dante wishes to show that the Earthly Paradise is like the "*prato*" described by Ovid in his account of this event

(disnebbiar vostro intelletto) (Purg. xxviii, 81). Again: “I will clear away the mist that offends you” (purgherò la nebbia che ti fiede) (Purg. xxviii, 90). Barolsky has noticed the relevance of this recurring metaphor to the curious role of Mercury in the *Primavera*.⁵⁹ Surely Botticelli’s Mercury is a visual metaphor alluding to the *vita contemplativa*.

In the *Primavera*, of course, Venus’ son, Cupid, aims his dart, not at Venus, “against all his custom,” but at the centermost of the three Graces, who dance in a circle between Venus and Mercury. The Graces are not mentioned by Dante in his account of the Earthly Paradise, but following his encounter with Matelda, the poet comes upon three maidens who, “showing themselves by their bearing to be of a higher order, came forward, dancing to their angelic roundelay.” The three maidens are, as Landino observes, an allegory of the Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and charity. For Landino, the role of this triad of dancing maidens is to lead Dante, irreversibly, from the *vita activa*, briefly embodied alongside Christian virtue by Matelda, to the *vita contemplativa*, embodied, Landino tells us, by Beatrice: “Beatrice contiene la dottrina della contemplativa.”⁶⁰ Now by general consensus, Botticelli’s surviving drawing in Berlin, depicting Dante’s three maidens, dancing to their “roundelay,” is directly inspired by the *Primavera*’s three dancing Graces (fig. 2). Perhaps the Graces in the *Primavera* were, in their turn, already inspired by the unforgettable imagery of Dante’s three dancing maidens, who beseech Beatrice to “turn your holy eyes upon your faithful one.... For grace do us the grace...” (“per grazia fa noi grazia”) (Purg. xxxi, 133ff.)⁶¹

I have suggested that the central theme of Dante’s Earthly Paradise episode — according to Landino, a vision of the perfect, if fugitive, *vita activa*, marking a crucial turning point in the soul’s pilgrimage from the *vita voluptuosa* to the *vita contemplativa* — fundamentally shaped the similarly episodic structure of the *Primavera*. In the painting, the beholder’s eye is invited by “celestial Venus” to take in, at a single glance, the passage from the dynamic scene of erotic pursuit at the right (*vita voluptuosa*) to the scene of contemplation at the left (*vita contemplativa*). The same episode, rich in allusions to classical poetry and mythology — allusions observed, emphasized, and elaborated upon by Landino in his commentary — might also have reinforced Botticelli’s use of selected classical poetic texts to define the painting’s precise cast of characters and their characteristic poses and gestures. But what remained fugitive in Dante’s narrative — an elusive vision of the Earthly Paradise — is rendered permanently available to the beholder, and in the first instance to the painter’s patron, in Botticelli’s *Primavera*.

Botticelli’s Paragone

To conclude, those writers who, from Walter Pater to Paul Barolsky, have sensed a significant kinship between Botticelli’s visionary *Primavera* and Dante’s vision of the

⁵⁹ Barolsky, “Matilda’s Hermeneutics,” *passim*.

⁶⁰ Landino, *Comento*, p.1469, referring to Purg. xxviii, 145ff.

⁶¹ As Warburg first observed, Horace, upon whose poetry (*Odes* i.30) Botticelli’s depiction of the three Graces is thought to depend, explicitly invokes the Graces as well as nymphs (*Gratiae zonis properentque Nymphae*). Botticelli’s drawing includes, in simultaneous narrative, not only the three Theological Virtues, but also the four dancing maidens, allegories of the Moral Virtues, whom Dante encounters just prior to this episode.

Earthly Paradise are right: the painting is dyed deep with Dante's imagery and poetics, reflecting Botticelli's own, and perhaps also his patron's, abiding engagement with the *Divina Commedia*. But the *Primavera's* relationship to Dante seems to go beyond mere community of imagery and style, however evocative, and I wish to suggest that the painting was directly inspired by Landino's reading of Dante's Earthly Paradise episode. In both we are invited to ponder the soul's spiritual and moral pilgrimage from the *vita voluptuosa*, through the *vita activa*, to the *vita contemplativa*. And both offer an enchanting vision of that brief passage in which the soul achieves, under the guidance of "celestial Venus" and within a perfect *paradiso terrestre*, a fugitive harmony between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.

These brief "observations" on Botticelli and Dante leave unanswered some key questions. To whom did Botticelli address his painted allegory of the soul's moral and spiritual pilgrimage, set within an Earthly Paradise conceived *all'antica*? The answer is, surely, the young Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, as well, perhaps, as his bride-to-be, Semiramide Appiani, in both of whom all Florentines surely hoped to see, variously embodied, civic and political virtue and the "true Christian religion," the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, conjoined within a flourishing Florentine Earthly Paradise.⁶²

But what of Botticelli's elusive "humanist adviser"? Could Landino, whose close engagement with contemporary Florentine painting is well known and indeed most in evidence precisely in his commentary on Dante, have himself directly shaped the artist's attempt to devise a visual allegory representing the very themes Landino found in Dante's Earthly Paradise?⁶³ However that may be, Botticelli's visual allegory does seem to offer valuable evidence of the keen interest the leading Florentine artists took in Dante's poem, an interest profoundly shaped by Landino's commentary, but of which our knowledge is still tantalizingly indirect.

Leonardo's interest in Dante, for example, has never been adequately studied, but seems on the basis of his surviving manuscripts and drawings to have been of some significance;⁶⁴ and it probably defined itself, at least initially, vis-à-vis Botticelli's epic engagement with the poem. There is some evidence that this interest took shape, like

⁶² Gombrich and, among more recent students of the painting, Rohlmann and Zöllner, have argued that the painting embodies a moral admonition to the young Medici, the latter basing their argument on the growing body of evidence that art works commissioned in connection with weddings typically sought to inculcate appropriate virtues (chastity, faithfulness, etc.).

⁶³ The Proemio to Landino's commentary includes (*Comento*, p.240-42) a brief survey of the principal Quattrocento Florentine painters and sculptors, in which he develops a critical language, based on Pliny, for the description of painting; Eng. trans. in S. Baldassari and A. Saiber, eds., *Images of Quattrocento Florence: selected writings in literature, history, and art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 204-06. M. Baxandall has used Landino's text as a lens for studying contemporary ways of experiencing Renaissance art in *Painting and experience in fifteenth century Italy* (2nd ed. N.Y.: Oxford, 1988), p.114-53. Landino's close engagement with contemporary painting surely provides part of the context for Botticelli's keen attention to his reading of Dante. For Landino and the visual arts see also O. Morisani, "Art historians and art critics, III: Cristoforo Landino," *Burlington magazine*, 95 (1953): 267-70.

⁶⁴ E. Solmi compiled many of the references to Dante in Leonardo's manuscripts in his standard "Le fonti dei manoscritti di Leonardo da Vinci: contributi," first published in 1908 and now conveniently available in his *Scritti vinciani* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1976), p.1-344, esp. p.130-35, along with his supplemental "Nuovi contributi," in the same volume. p.345-405, esp. p.354 on Dante. See also Parronchi's previously cited article, "Come gli artisti leggevano Dante," p.123-30, and the brief note by C. Pedretti, "Leonardo & Dante," *Achademia leonardi vinci* 4 (1991): 204-10. Most of Leonardo's references concern Dante's naturalistic descriptions of landscape, the movement of water and air, etc. (see below).

Botticelli's, as early as the 1470s,⁶⁵ and Leonardo might well have witnessed Botticelli working on the preparatory drawings for the Landino Dante. Leonardo is also thought to have studied Botticelli's surviving Dante drawings of the 1490s, which he could have known either through the artist himself or through Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, with whom Leonardo was in contact between 1500 and 1503, the year in which the young Medici died.⁶⁶ It has been suggested that some of the most beautiful drawings from Leonardo's later period (ca. 1503-1506), and especially his bewitching *Pointing Lady* at Windsor Castle, traditionally associated with masqueraders, are in fact illustrations of Dante's Earthly Paradise episode as interpreted by Landino,⁶⁷ and that in these drawings Leonardo sought especially to demonstrate his superiority to Botticelli as an illustrator of Dante.⁶⁸ Leonardo seems to have been especially captivated by Dante's descriptions of natural processes, and his *Pointing Lady* is particularly remarkable for its treatment of the landscape setting in which "Matelda" appears.⁶⁹ Leonardo's manuscripts, of course, contain several friendly criticisms of Botticelli, especially of his ability to render landscape. Could he have been trying, in his drawing, to trump the allegorical, Dantesque landscape of Botticelli's *Primavera*?

Michelangelo, too, is reported to have fully illustrated with pen drawings a wide-margined copy of the Landino Dante, no longer extant.⁷⁰ A well-known anecdote related

⁶⁵ B. Degenhart, in a book-length article, "Dante, Leonardo und Sangallo: Dante-Illustrationen Guiliano da Sangallos in ihrem Verhältnis zu Leonardo da Vinci und zu den Figurenzeichnungen der Sangallo," *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 7 (1955): 101-292, suggested that the marginal illustrations in a copy of the 1481 Landino Dante in the Biblioteca Vallicelliana, Rome, attributed to the Sangallos, are based on a lost set of Leonardo illustrations dating from the 1470s. The lecture on which that article is based was first summarized in Degenhart, "Dante, Leonardo, Sangallo in einem Zeichnungstyp der Renaissance," *Kunstchronik* 7 (1954): 131-34. Parronchi, "Come gli artisti leggevano Dante," p.126, agrees that the model can only have been drawings by Leonardo, and suggests that the illustrations invite comparison with those in the Vatican manuscript derived from Leonardo's lost treatise on painting (Cod. Urb. Lat. 1270).

⁶⁶ P. Meller, "Leonardo da Vinci's drawings to the Divine Comedy," *Acta historiae artium* 2 (1955): 135-68, especially p.140.

⁶⁷ Meller, "Leonardo da Vinci's drawings to the Divine Comedy," has argued persuasively that Leonardo's *The Pointing Lady* (Windsor Castle 12.581) is a portrait of Dante's Matelda and part of a series of drawings datable ca 1503-1506 and illustrating episodes from Dante's Earthly Paradise narrative. Kenneth Clark warmly endorsed this reading in the revised ed. of his standard catalog of the Windsor drawings, *Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, 2nd ed., rev. with the assistance of Carlo Pedretti, 3 vols. (N.Y.: Phaidon, 1968). Pedretti himself, "The Pointing Lady," *Burlington magazine* 140 (1969): 338-46, observed shortly thereafter that Meller's is "the kind of theory that can be replaced only by a better one" (p.140) and cautiously explored alternative interpretations. Jane Roberts ("Nymphs"), has recently endorsed Meller's thesis still more strongly, as did Parronchi ("Come gli artisti leggevano Dante," p.129), the latter even suggesting that the imagery of Dante's Earthly Paradise episode takes us to the heart of Leonardo's art, where the depiction of the natural world yields to the imaginative creation of new worlds.

⁶⁸ Meller, p.140.

⁶⁹ The Sangallo drawings studied by Degenhart (see above) are associated with Leonardo in part because of their close attention to Dante's descriptions of natural phenomena. C. Vecce, in an excellent recent biographical study, *Leonardo* (Rome: Salerno, 1998), p.288, has suggested that Leonardo sought out a copy of Dante's *Quaestio de aqua et terra*, published in Venice in 1508 by Manfredo di Monferrato, shortly after it appeared.

⁷⁰ For Michelangelo interest in Dante, see especially K. Borinski, *Die Rätsel Michelangelos: Michelangelo und Dante* (Munich: G. Müller, 1908); Parronchi, "Come gli artisti leggevano Dante," p.131-34; and, more recently, P. Armour, "'A ciascun artista l'ultimo suo': Dante and Michelangelo," in Parker, ed., "Visible

by the Anonimo Magliabechiano suggests not only that both Leonardo and Michelangelo were popularly regarded as learned students of Dante but that the artistic rivalry between the two artists might well have extended to the study and interpretation of the *Divina Commedia*. In this anecdote, the Anonimo, whose description of Botticelli's surviving Dante illustrations has been cited above, relates how a group of educated men, engaged in a conversation outside the Palazzo Spini, glimpsed Leonardo passing by and invited him to elucidate a few difficult lines of Dante. When Michelangelo turns up, Leonardo declines their request, deferring (perhaps with sarcasm suppressed by our source?) to his great rival and eliciting a characteristically sarcastic riposte.⁷¹ Leonardo's closest study of Dante, as well as this emblematic encounter, seemingly occurred in the first decade of the 16th century, during the period of intense rivalry when the two masters were working alongside one another in the Palazzo Vecchio, Leonardo on the *Battle of Anghiari*, Michelangelo on the *Battle of Cascina*; perhaps it was even prompted in part by this very rivalry.

Some memory of heated artistic competition in the interpretation of Dante might linger in Vasari's dismissive if vicarious description of Botticelli as a "persona sofistica" who, "without a scrap of learning ... plays the commentator to Dante." Could the *Primavera* be Botticelli's attempt at a "paragone": a tour de force intended to demonstrate that the painter can — as Leonardo would later seek to demonstrate in his writings and, perhaps, also in his *Pointing Lady* — rival the poet, in this instance by powerfully evoking an allegorical *paradiso terrestre all'antica*, resonant with classical and Christian paradises lost?⁷²

parlare," p.141-80. For Michelangelo's lost Dante illustrations see Meller, p.144 and, for the text of the report, his n.52; the volume in question is said to have belonged to the sculptor Antonio Montauti (d. 1740) and to have perished with the latter in a shipwreck between Livorno and Civitavecchia.

⁷¹ *Il codice magliabechiano cl.xvii. 17*, p.115. For the suggestion that Leonardo's response might have been sarcastic, see Parronchi, "Come gli artisti leggevano Dante," p.131.

⁷² It is worth recalling in this context that Leonardo's initial work on a paragone of the arts, undertaken in the early 1490s in Milan, was prompted, in part, by the publication of Landino's translation of Giovanni Simonetta's *De gestis Francisci Sphortiae* (Milano, 1490), and especially by Francesco Puteolano's preface with its attack on the visual arts; see recently Vecce, *Leonardo*, p.120.

