

The Kite, Envy & a Memory of Leonardo da Vinci's Childhood

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A well-known drawing by Leonardo at Christ Church in Oxford is catalogued as an allegory alluding to the political state of Milan (fig. 1).¹ On the verso of the same sheet the artist has sketched a combat between Virtue or Fame and Envy, as the original inscriptions reveal (fig. 2): "It would be easier to find a body without a shadow than virtue without envy" (above), "envy" (below the figure on the left) and "fame or virtue" (below the right-hand personification).

Both sketches were drawn at the court of Ludovico il Moro Sforza in Milan and are usually dated between c. 1483 and c. 1487 (although a later date should not be ruled out).² The verso, which is obviously related to other allegorical representations of the same theme, requires no further commentary in the present context, but the iconography of the recto has not yet been adequately explained. Kenneth Clark interpreted these complex allegories as an outlet for Leonardo's "bizarre fancies," and even in the most comprehensive recent monograph on Leonardo such inventions are grudgingly acknowledged by Martin Kemp as iconographic "nightmares" which seem "to border upon elaborate absurdity."³ Their allusive meaning is perceived as too dense not only for present-day viewers—who no longer share the early modern taste for allegory—but also for the members of Ludovico's court.

Although some details are ambiguous and escape interpretation, the allegory's general message could not, however, be clearer. On the left, Justice holds a sword, her traditional attribute, as well as the mirror of Prudence, since the latter is engaged in other actions. In her right hand Prudence holds a remora. This may have been intended as a covert allusion to the Sforza family's heraldic emblem, but it more probably functions as a specific attribute of Prudence since, according to Pliny and Ripa, the *ecneide* or remora is a symbol of Prudence (i.e., of this particular Virtue). The other objects Prudence holds in her right hand are probably a mulberry branch (according to Alciatus, the *moro's* leaves allude to Prudence), a dove and a *scopetta* (brush), emblems as well as *imprese* of the Sforza family and, more specifically, of Ludovico il Moro.⁴ With her left hand Prudence protects a cock, a well-known symbol of vigilance, from the onslaught of rapacious dogs, the traditional attributes of Envy, and from the aggression of Envy herself, here symbolized by a horned female satyr with withered breasts. The bird at Prudence's feet is cursorily sketched, but not so schematically that one cannot recognize a small partridge. Like many other animals, the partridge enjoyed positive as well as negative associations in medieval and Renaissance bestiaries. In Leonardo's writings, the partridge

could be a symbol of envy, theft and deceit, but also of truth, and it is probably with this latter significance that the bird has been included in the allegory.⁵ Indeed, it seems to me undeniable that the artist's objective—whatever the specific meaning of each detail—was that of representing a clear-cut *psychomachia* between Ludovico's virtues on the left (Justice, Prudence, Vigilance, Truth), which protect the Milanese grass serpents in the cage (although one of them seems to be fighting a dog outside this cage), and the vices coming from the right. If this is true, the large bird at the top right of the composition cannot be the imperial eagle coming to the rescue of Prudence, as has been often suggested, but more likely a kite, which in Leonardo's bestiary was a symbol of Envy.

As shown by a North Italian print engraved around 1465–1470 (fig. 3), the kite and the dog were well-established attributes of Envy before Leonardo made his drawing; if the bird on the Oxford sheet is, indeed, a kite, this means that Leonardo was thinking in terms of simple oppositions—oppositions that were reshuffled into a still more complex invention on the sheet's verso.⁶

Since the beginning of this century, that is, since Sigmund Freud first published his essay titled *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* in 1910, the kite has been at the center of numerous psychoanalytic and art historical inquiries. On the back of a sheet concerned with his studies of flight, Leonardo recorded a childhood memory (or his re-elaboration of a supposed infantile memory) that must have had a particular meaning for him: "This writing distinctly about the kite seems to be my destiny, because among the first recollections of my infancy, it seemed to me that, as I was in my cradle, a kite came to me and opened my mouth with its tail and struck me several times with its tail inside my lips."⁷

As is well known, Freud had based a part of his psychoanalytic interpretation of this recollection on Herzfeld's erroneous translation of the Italian original, since the word *nibbio* was not rendered with the correct term, "kite," but translated as "vulture." Several generations of art historians have since attempted to discredit Freud's analysis on the basis of this factual mistake. Meyer Schapiro, who was sympathetic to psychoanalysis and wrote the most serious rebuttal of Freud's theory, was not the first to point out the erroneous translation.⁸ As early as 1923, Eric MacLagan had written a letter to the editor of *The Burlington Magazine*, who had praised the essay in a previous editorial, to protest the "prominence given to Dr. Freud's little book on Leonardo" and to undermine Freud's argument by exposing the incorrect translation.⁹

The irony of this criticism, which laid to rest Freud's



Figure 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Allegory Alluding to the Political State of Milan*, c. 1483–1487 or c. 1494, pen and brown ink (Oxford, Christ Church, cat. 0037 recto). Photograph: courtesy of The Governing Body, Christ Church, Oxford.

association between Leonardo's memory and the Egyptian symbolism of the vulture, lies in the fact that if Freud had known the symbolic meaning of the real bird in Leonardo's recollection his argument would have gained yet further strength and coherence. Far from discrediting his interpretation, Leonardo's note on the kite as a symbol of Envy (an elaboration of the text read by the painter in the *Fior di virtù* and jotted down in his notebooks) demonstrates that the kite could be interpreted as a (cruel) maternal figure: "ENVY. We read of the kite that, when it sees its young ones growing too big in the nest, out of envy it pecks their sides and keeps them without food."¹⁰ This association makes it more likely—not less—that Leonardo's childhood memory symbolized his mother Caterina.¹¹ For Kurt Eissler, who wrote the most circumstantial defense of Freud's essay, the short medieval text copied by Leonardo reveals the artist's ambivalent hostility toward his real mother and reinforces Freud's idea of the tension provoked by the two maternal figures in Leonardo's emotional life.¹² After all, one of Freud's most memorable passages deals with the ambiguous smile of Saint Anne, which is interpreted as a reflection of Caterina's jealousy of Donna Albiera: "The artist seems to have used the blissful smile of Saint Anne to disavow and to cloak the envy which the unfortunate woman felt when she was forced to give up her son to her better-born rival."¹³

Without questioning the legitimacy of a psychobiographical approach to Leonardo's notes and works of art as a way of penetrating more deeply into his emotional life, one should not forget, however, that Leonardo's recollections and sketches belong to a precise historical, social and physical context. The Envy theme appears as a recurrent preoccupation in Leonardo's art. Another celebrated sheet at Christ Church comprises an allegory of *Pleasure and Pain* as well as several very complex allegories of *Envy* that are duly explained in Leonardo's extensive written annotations (figs. 4–5).¹⁴ Followers of Freud, such as Eissler, have used this material to confirm some of their mentor's assumptions and to advance some hypotheses of their own. According to Eissler, the sketches of *Pleasure and Pain* on the verso (fig. 5) and of *Virtue and Envy* on the recto (fig. 4)—which unite two contrasting personifications in a single figure—reveal, more than any other document, Leonardo's unconscious attitudes toward sexual intimacy. What Eissler did not acknowledge, however, is that these drawings belong to a homogeneous series. It is no coincidence that both sheets at Oxford (figs. 1–2 & 4–5) have identical dimensions and provenance. Neither is it coincidental that both were known to Gian Paolo Lomazzo, since it means that both sheets were still in Milan during the sixteenth century.¹⁵ Similarly, it is no coincidence that they deal with the same

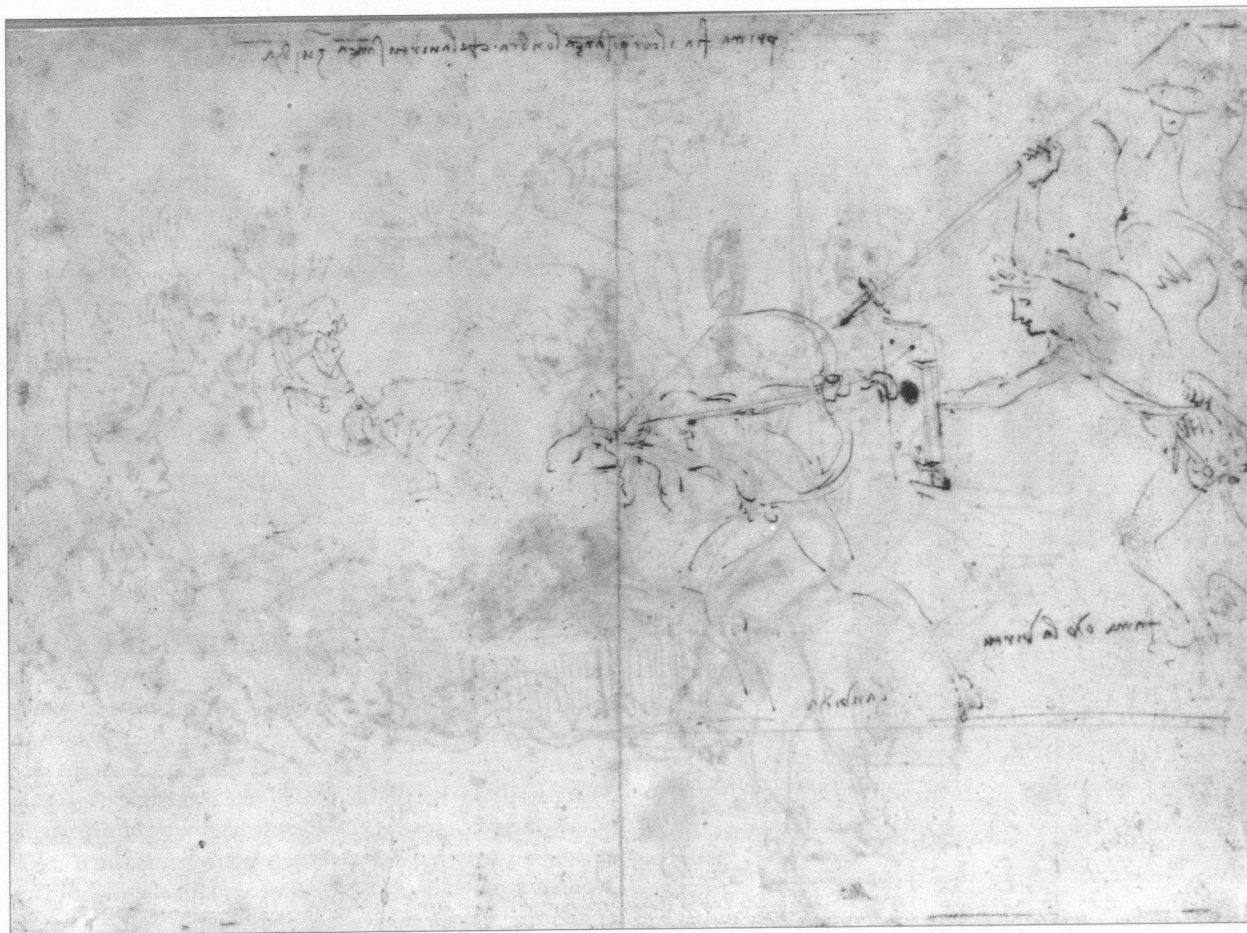


Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *A Combat between Virtue or Fame and Envy*, c. 1483–1487 or c. 1494, pen and brown ink (Oxford, Christ Church, cat. 0037 verso). Photograph: courtesy of The Governing Body, Christ Church, Oxford.

theme. In other words, what seems to be the expression of private preoccupations cannot be separated from the allegory, an allegory obviously related to Leonardo's patron Ludovico il Moro.

Even though this court assignment must have been a precipitating factor for Leonardo's brooding over the sentiments expressed, the manifest content of the entire series has more to do with the duke of Milan than with Leonardo. As Bradley Collins wrote:

As psychoanalytic evidence the allegories seem too good to be true. They . . . seem so close to the artist's unconscious as to appear suspect. And one can imagine an art historian leaping to depersonalize the drawings by supplying a political meaning to each figure and symbol. Yet Leonardo enjoyed an undeniable artistic freedom in these sketches and his unconscious must have taken advantage of it.¹⁶

The appeal to the reader's faith implied in this quotation's first and last sentences is evident—but one should not surrender so uncritically. I am inclined to see in these drawings not so much "political" as moralizing allegories that

would have been easily understood and greatly appreciated by the patron as well as by the members of his court.

As one of the most basic human passions, envy has a long literary and iconographic tradition. Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle as well as Latin poets like Horace and Ovid wrote about it, and Saint Paul and the Church Fathers subsequently Christianized its discourse. Popular proverbs concerned with envy, which were later collected in Erasmus's *Adagia*, are numerous and, at least since the time of Dante, envy has been associated with treacherous courtly life.¹⁷ On the visual side, the iconography of envy enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages in pictorial cycles of the seven deadly sins, but it was in the courtly atmosphere of late-fifteenth-century northern Italy that its representation acquired more secular and independent connotations.¹⁸ Mantegna's engravings in Mantua and Leonardo's drawings in Milan are crucial evidence of the phenomenon before its codification in the sixteenth-century *letteratura cortigiana*.

Once Leonardo's reflections on the theme are placed in their proper social (i.e., courtly) as well as "physical" and historical contexts (i.e., as a series of allegorical drawings for his patron and for the entertainment of Ludovico's court), they seem partly to lose the individualized connotations that are so important for a psychobiographical approach to Leonardo's



Figure 3. North Italian, *Invidia*, c. 1465–1470, engraving (Arthur A. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving*, London, 1938, vol. 1, p. 250). Photograph: author.

works. Yet the art historian should not imitate the psychoanalyst's shortcomings by reducing the issue to a dubious, inevitably fragmentary and, at any rate, subjective reconstruction of the past "as it was."

It would be tiresome to repeat yet again a critical review of the most important polemical writings provoked by Freud's interpretation. Instead, it is more productive to indicate the different strategies employed by some art historians to come to terms with it. Meyer Schapiro not only exposed the erroneous translation and its consequences for Freud's theory; he also discussed the classical *topoi* which deal with great men who seemed to have been predestined from their birth to achieve unusual accomplishments and great eloquence,¹⁹ iconographic issues such as the spread of the *Anna Metterza*, theological implications like the discussion on the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and, among other things, the probable precipitant of Leonardo's childhood memory.

Freud himself had already noted that Leonardo's scientific interest in bird flight certainly played a role in his sudden recollection, but it was Meyer Schapiro who reinscribed the childhood memory into its "physical" context in the *Codex Atlanticus*, thus reducing it to a much more mundane experience. Yet Leonardo's reflections on the technical aspects of the kite's flight indicate only the cause of his sudden impulse;

they do not explain his enduring interest in the theme of envy. If Pedretti is right in dating the childhood memory to c. 1504–1505, and if the Oxford drawings belong to the period 1483–1487 (or, alternatively, to c. 1494), this suggests that Leonardo was repeatedly brooding over a sentiment that he must also have observed and experienced on an artistic level.²⁰ More importantly, while Meyer Schapiro identified the possible precipitant of Leonardo's recollection and pointed out the connection between the kite and Envy, he did not explain why the bird repeatedly struck Leonardo's lips and inserted its tail into his mouth, a much more revealing detail for Freud (or for any other psychoanalyst).

In a recent lecture on Leonardo's dreams, James Beck has also taken issue with Freud. He argues that the note in the *Codex Atlanticus* is neither a dream nor a childhood memory, but a fantasy based on a classical source. Aesop, whose texts Leonardo knew well, deals with the kite in the context of envy; in the *Sogno di Daniello*, the kite means death of the parents; but it is, above all, in Pliny's *Natural History*—a work Leonardo owned—that the movement of the bird's tail is discussed in order to explain how man learned to direct the movements of his ships on the oceans, moving the rudder as the tail of the kite.²¹ According to Beck, it is probable that Pliny was the source of Leonardo's imagination, "[P]lace Freud [sic], one thing is certain: it was not a 'real' childhood experience." (This is a point that Freud himself stressed at the beginning of his second chapter: "[T]he scene with the vulture would not be a memory of Leonardo's but a fantasy, which he formed at a later date and transposed to his childhood. This is often the way in which childhood memories originate.")²²

In his book *Why the Mona Lisa Smiles and Other Tales by Vasari*, Paul Barolsky also touches on one of Freud's central points, arguing that Mona Lisa smiles because she was the wife of Francesco del Giocondo; if this semiserious proposal sounds at first trivial, the author buttresses it by citing the Vasarian-Renaissance taste for simple jokes and puns.²³

Art historians' different temperaments and objectives explain their different approaches. All of them have made plausible suggestions: The wish to connect himself with great men of the past may have unconsciously stimulated Leonardo to create an image based on traditional tales of natural eloquence; Aesop and the *Fior di virtù*, as well as the Renaissance discourse on envy, may have colored his principally scientific interest in the kite's flight; and Mona Lisa may smile for any reason whatsoever. But none of these art historians has asked a question that can compete with Freud's ambitious investigation.²⁴

If Freud had only made us aware of the potential emotional implications of the image created by Leonardo—that of the bird which opens his mouth and strikes him several times with its tail inside his lips—we would have to be grateful to him forever. But Freud has given us much more, something that has been partly obscured by the rather pedantic polemic between his detractors and his defenders. One of his main issues was to understand why Leonardo's works still wield an enormous emotional appeal to the modern viewer. Although he began his research from a document, he then scrutinized in the most serious and sustained way the *form* of Leonardo's



Figure 4. Leonardo da Vinci, *Two Allegories of Envy*, c. 1483–1487 or c. 1494, pen and brown ink with some light-red chalk (Oxford, Christ Church, cat. 0034 recto). Photograph: courtesy of The Governing Body, Christ Church, Oxford.

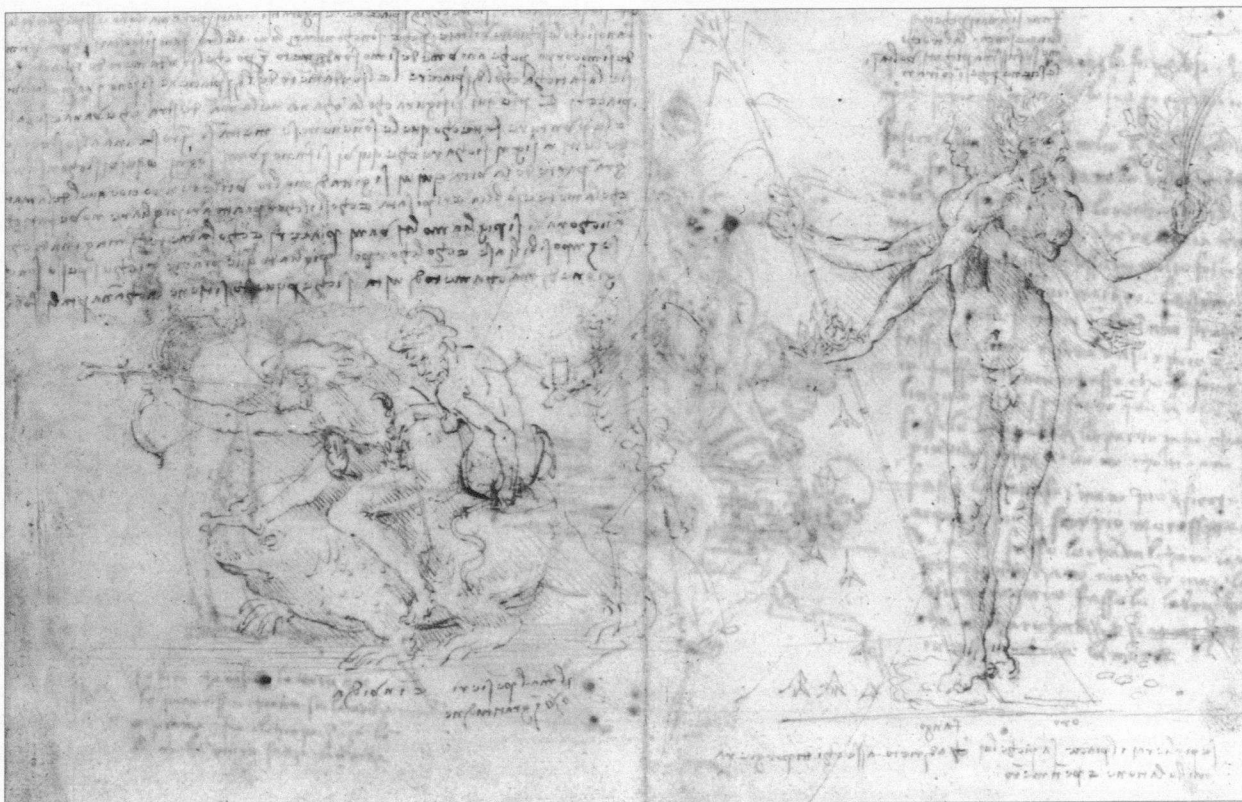


Figure 5. Leonardo da Vinci, *Pleasure and Pain* (on the right-hand side), c. 1483–1487 or c. 1494, pen and brown ink (Oxford, Christ Church, cat. 0034 verso). Photograph: courtesy of The Governing Body, Christ Church, Oxford.

works. While most art historians, the present writer included, have concentrated their analysis on written and/or circumstantial evidence—whether literary sources and traditions, iconographic issues or cultural conventions—Freud looked long and hard at the pictures. Art historians, however, do not seem particularly interested in the questions posed by Freud, or at least they do not seem to share the intensity of his inquiry—namely, to find a plausible explanation for visual expressions that reveal psychic energies, emotions and passions activated by the creative process.

In his analysis of Leonardo's *Madonna of the Yarn-Winder*, John Shearman has criticized a certain kind of iconology which is incapable of seeing "what seems most creative in the picture."²⁵ He praised Fra Pietro da Novellara for seeing what Leonardo had put into the painting and for sharing a style of

image reading that might be called neo-Plinian, in Renaissance terms. Quoting Pliny's brief *ekphrasis* of a work by Aristides, Shearman observes that (according to Pliny) this painter had been the first to depict the mind and express the feelings of a human being. "What 'one feels,'" adds Shearman, "is a reading, an interpretation, of the represented action in behavioral and psychological terms, or more simply of what is supposed to be going on."²⁶

It is likely that Shearman is critical of, if not hostile to, Freudian interpretations of works of art. Yet when he draws our attention to the importance of the viewer's psychological response to Renaissance painting, he deals with issues that are not very distant, at least theoretically, from those that interested Freud. And this observation is intended as a compliment.

NOTES

¹ James Byam Shaw, *Drawings by Old Masters at Christ Church Oxford* (Oxford, 1976), vol. 1, *Catalogue*, p. 37; pen and brown ink, 206 x 283 mm.

² A. E. Popham (*The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci* [London, 1964], p. 117) suggested a date about 1483–1485. Byam Shaw, 1976, p. 37, dates the drawing 1485–1487, citing Carlo Pedretti, "Leonardo's Allegories at Oxford Explained by Lomazzo," *The Burlington Magazine* 96 (1954): 175–77. Pedretti, however, said nothing about the date of the drawings in his 1954 article.

³ See Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Martin Kemp (London, 1989), p. 120; and Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* (London, Melbourne & Toronto, 1981), p. 164. These drawings are not discussed in the most recent monograph on Leonardo, Pietro C. Marani, *Leonardo: Una carriera di pittore* (Milan, 1999).

⁴ Andreas Alciatus, *The Latin Emblems: Indexes and Lists*, ed. Peter M. Daly with Virginia W. Callahan, assisted by Simon Cuttler (Toronto, Buffalo & London, 1985), vol. 2, emblem 210.

⁵ Jean-Paul Richter, ed., *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, 2 vols., 3rd ed. (London & New York, 1970), nos. 1227 & 1238.

⁶ Arthur A. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving: A Critical Catalogue with Complete Reproduction of All the Prints Described*, vol. 1 (London, 1938), p. 250.

⁷ Richter, 1970, no. 1363.

⁸ Meyer Schapiro, "Freud and Leonardo: An Art Historical Study," (1956) reprinted in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society*, ed. Meyer Schapiro (New York, 1994), pp. 153–92. See also "Further Notes on Freud and Leonardo," in Schapiro, 1994, pp. 193–99.

⁹ Eric MacLagan, "Leonardo in the Consulting Room," *The Burlington Magazine* 42 (1923): 54.

¹⁰ Richter, 1970, no. 1221; on the *Fior di virtù*, see Edmondo Solmi, "Le fonti dei manoscritti di Leonardo da Vinci: Contributi" (1908), repr. in *Scritti vinciani* (Florence, 1976), p. 157.

¹¹ Bradley Isham Collins, "Psychoanalytic Biography and Art History: A Critical Study of Psychobiographical Approaches to Leonardo da Vinci" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1995), pp. 80–81.

¹² Kurt R. Eissler, *Leonardo da Vinci: Psychoanalytic Notes on the Enigma* (New York, 1961).

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (Vienna,

1910; repr. New York & London, 1964), p. 72.

¹⁴ Byam Shaw, 1976, pp. 36–37; pen and brown ink, with some light red-chalk on the *recto*, 210 x 289 mm.

¹⁵ Gian Paolo Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle arti*, ed. Roberto Paolo Ciardi (Florence, 1974), pp. 390–91. See also Carlo Pedretti, 1954; and Ernst H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 137–38.

¹⁶ Collins, 1995, p. 163; emphases mine.

¹⁷ See Dante, *Inferno*, XIII.64–66.

¹⁸ On Envy's personification, see Victoria Lorini, "Invidia: Die Darstellung des Neides in Italien von Giotto bis Ripa" (M.A. thesis, J. W. Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1997).

¹⁹ None of the examples mentioned by Schapiro, however, refers to a painter.

²⁰ Carlo Pedretti, "Il 'bello spettacolo' di Leonardo," *Achademia Leonardi Vinci* 5 (1992): 163–65.

²¹ James Beck, *I sogni di Leonardo*, XXXII Lettura Vinciana (April 15, 1992) (Florence, 1993), pp. 8–10. The *Sogno di Daniello* (Bologna, 1491) is an Italian translation of the Latin [*Danielis*] *Somniorum expositio* (Augsburg, 1487). On Pliny's reference to the kite, see *Naturalis historia* 10.12, trans. Horace Rackham (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), vol. 3, p. 311.

²² Freud, 1910 (repr. 1964), p. 33.

²³ Paul Barolsky, *Why the Mona Lisa Smiles and Other Tales by Vasari* (University Park, Penn., 1991); German translation, *Warum lächelt Mona Lisa? Vasaris Erfindungen*, trans. Robin Cackett (Berlin, 1995), pp. 83–86.

²⁴ For the most remarkable exception, see Klaus Herding, *Freuds 'Leonardo': Eine Auseinandersetzung mit psychoanalytischen Theorien der Gegenwart* (Munich, 1998); Herding, however, does not discuss in depth the connections with the Renaissance iconography of Envy. See also Daniel Arasse, *Léonard de Vinci: Le rythme du monde* (Paris, 1997), pp. 488–99.

²⁵ John Shearman, *Only Connect... Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1988, Bollingen Series XXXV.37 (Washington, D.C. & Princeton, 1992), p. 5.

²⁶ Shearman, 1992, p. 5.