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## Botticelli's *Primavera* and the Poetic Imagination of Italian Renaissance Art

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Toward the center of a bower of love, the goddess of love herself, hand raised delicately in sweet salutation, beckons the beholder into her beflowered dream world, a pleasance or *locus amoenus*, a place of pleasure and beauty, of love past, indeed of ancient primordial love renewed as Zephyr pursues Chloris who is transformed into Flora before our very eyes. At Venus' side the goddess's handmaidens, the Graces, embody their very grace in dance, while Cupid above, personification of desire, aims his flaming arrow at one of these three sisters. Turned away as if indifferent to them, Mercury gazes heavenward in contemplation of what lies beyond this enchanted world permeated by mute music, silent song (fig. 1).

The *Primavera* is now so much a part of our historical consciousness and aesthetic heritage that it is hard to believe that after Vasari briefly mentioned it in his *Lives* of the artists from the middle years of the sixteenth century, the painting was all but forgotten until the end of the nineteenth century, when Botticelli's art was rediscovered. The painter's lyrical work was eclipsed by the taste for the grand manner of Raphael and the art that followed him, which dominated the modern sensibility until the revival of interest in the pre-Raphaelite.

Botticelli's picture is now almost universally believed to be a work described in an inventory of 1499 of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, cousin of the more famous Lorenzo il Magnifico. It is widely held that the picture was made in the first place for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, a significant patron who also commissioned Botticelli to illustrate the *Divine Comedy* and who was a patron and sponsor of the painter's younger friend Michelangelo.

The *Primavera* is rich in social, political, familial, literary, religious, and mythic significance. The smiling Flora, *felix*

Flora, as she was sometimes called, is the beautiful personification of Florence herself, of Fiorenza, the city of *fiori* or flowers. The lovely golden fruit of Botticelli's bower evoke the *palle* or globes in the arms of the Medici, who saw themselves as the promoters of the return of the golden age. As queen of a courtly realm, Venus presides over this classical revival, the beautiful idealization of Medicean hegemony whose royalty also has associations with that of the queen of heaven, who similarly presides over the garden of paradise.

If the garden of Venus appears to us as an earthly paradise, the goddess's presence as well as Mercury's astrologically evoke the planetary bodies of the heavens. If Zephyr's embrace of Chloris is carnal, Mercury's gaze heavenward is ultimately spiritual, and if the wind god's pursuit of the nymph represents a moment in time, Mercury's contemplation of the heavens evokes the timelessness of paradise itself.

As nature is ever artful, so is the painter, and his very artifice is reflected in an image saturated with art: garden art, painting, poetry, sculpture, architecture, music, and dance. Botticelli's bower transmogrifies the gardens of his day and mirrors such painted bowers as that of Uccello's mock-chivalric *Battle of San Romano* (fig. 2), also painted for the Medici. Like Uccello's picture, Botticelli's, in its large scale and decorative effect, evokes the ornate tapestries of the garden of love rooted in the courtly tradition of the *Roman de la Rose*. As the artist's three Graces have associations with ancient statuary of the same subject, so his Mercury echoes, in the courtly grace of his very posture, arm resting on hip, the attitude of Verrocchio's modern bronze *David* (fig. 3), another Medici commission.

The column-like trees and central arch that springs from them form a natural architecture, artfully conceived in relation to the kinds of classicizing buildings of the period, for example, the porch of the Pazzi Chapel with its similar series of columns crowned by an arch. Such thinking about the architecture of nature is common in the art of Botticelli, seen in the so-called *Minerva and the Centaur* (fig. 4), where the large horizontal slabs of stone form an entablature, or in the

Uffizi *Adoration of the Magi* (fig. 5) in which a hill, functioning as a natural throne like the real thrones of the *sacra conversazione*, elevates the holy family above the adoring figures. The frozen music of Botticelli's architecture is animated by the dance of the three Graces and rhythmic movements of the other characters who respond to a silent music—a visible music that evokes the court masques of the Renaissance, where mythic beings dance in celebration of the virtues of their aristocratic patrons.

Whereas Botticelli's painted garden still conforms to the literary conventions of romance, most conspicuously the *Roman de la Rose* where Zephyr and Flora similarly appear in a revival of the golden age, his pictorial paradise, related to real gardens, is thus part of the "art" of agriculture. Such agriculture was found in the orchards of the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano, where Pontormo would paint a short time later a fresco (fig. 6) associated thematically to Botticelli's *Primavera*, depicting related gods of gardens and fertility, Vertumnus and Pomona among others, along with a large, lush festoon of fruits and flowers, the products of agriculture. Agricultural imagery becomes common in the period of Botticelli's painting, for example, Piero di Cosimo's *Discovery of Honey*, where satyrs, banging on pots and pans, drive bees to a hollow tree, where they make a hive, the very origins of apiculture, so importantly a part of agricultural life.

The art of agriculture evoked by Botticelli's picture has broad ramifications in the art of the Italian Renaissance. It stands behind the rise of the taste for the pastoral in art and literature alike, as in the Giorgionesque *Fête Champêtre* (fig. 7). Recall that the herdsmen of such pictures are part of the world of the farm, where animals are domesticated; and we need to think here as well of the great Renaissance villas, which were working farms, sometimes decorated, as we have seen, with the gods of fertility. Botticelli's picture may seem in its urbane refinements as far removed from the rustic realm as do the classical forms and vocabulary of Renaissance villas and pastoral art, but all of these works, despite basic differences of style, subject, and medium, share roots in the world

of agriculture, a wellspring of "culture" in the modern sense of the word.

Why did Botticelli paint the *Primavera*? This question has vexed scholars, who have provided many inconclusive explanations, none of which is universally accepted. According to one old, now receding, hypothesis, the picture was made as a pedagogical exercise to educate the patron, the youthful Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, in the virtues of Venus as extolled by his mentor Ficino. In the most widely held view at present, the picture was painted to celebrate the marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco to Semiramide Appiani. A more radical interpretation, not given wide credence, posits that the picture has to do with Lorenzo il Magnifico and his life story in love as recorded in poetry. There are indeed analogies between the writings of both Ficino and Lorenzo il Magnifico and Botticelli's picture, but these analogies do not allow for a definitive explanation of the precise purpose of the *Primavera*.

Speculation concerning the putative original purpose of Botticelli's picture has often deflected attention from the image itself. So too has the intense discussion of the *Primavera*'s literary context. Indeed, a review of the by now vast bibliography that has overgrown the painting shows that Botticelli's image frequently disappears from view altogether as scholars analyze or argue about the texts said to have shaped or not shaped his thinking. Sometimes such discussions of literature, which largely ignore the painting itself, are extremely reductive; for example, a claim made not many years ago, now abandoned, that Poliziano's Latin poetry is the key to interpretation of the picture. Similarly, the discussion of Poliziano's poetry in Italian and Lorenzo il Magnifico's related poetry has been pressed so hard that other aspects of Botticelli's known literary culture, notably Ovid and Dante, are still inadequately considered or appreciated.

Leaving aside for the moment the issue of which works of literature were uppermost in Botticelli's mind when he painted the *Primavera*, let us look anew at his image, at its complexity and subtlety of design, and how the form of his

picture renders his meaning. It is indeed remarkable how little attention is given to Botticelli's design, to his visual thought, to what he makes visible—to the painting itself.

As Venus is slightly isolated from the group of Flora (fig. 1), so Mercury stands somewhat apart from the Graces. Venus' elbow is nevertheless exquisitely contiguous with Flora's floral draperies, with their petal-like shape, and Mercury's similarly graceful, bent arm is ever so delicately tangential to the back of one of the Graces. Although only slightly isolated from the figures to which they are otherwise conjoined, Mercury and Venus, the two planetary presences, are chromatically linked. For Mercury's red draperies with their golden flames of love are linked to the identical color of Venus' dress and the similar golden flames that border both her neckline and bosom. By the same token, the blue of Venus' drapery unites her to the bluish tones of Zephyr on the other side, as it weds her to the sky beyond.

Further carefully calculated conjunctions present themselves. As Zephyr the wind god has wings, so Mercury, a pendant figure, has wings on his sandals. These two male figures of desire, carnal and contemplative, neatly frame two clusters of figures: the three Graces on one side, the triad of Chloris, Flora, and Venus on the other. As the intertwined Graces are united, so are the other three, for Chloris becomes Flora, who shares the role as deity of fertility with Venus. At the apex of the pyramid of which the two antithetical winged gods Zephyr and Mercury form the base, Cupid, a third winged male figure of desire, is seen aiming his flaming arrow. His extended arm mimics that of Zephyr as he reaches for Chloris, and his flames, aimed toward Mercury's side of the picture, are linked to those upon the god's drapery.

Stable and serene, the *Primavera* is nevertheless a series of multiple, continuously oscillating arrangements of figures, some in isolation (Venus, Mercury, or Cupid), some in pairs (Zephyr embracing Chloris, Chloris becoming Flora) or the above-mentioned triads (the Flora group or the Graces), which are seen as antiphonal quartets when apprehended in relation to the closely contiguous figures of Venus and Mercury re-

spectively. These varying arrangements have the intricacy and clarity of different voices emerging within the counterpoint of Botticelli's pictorial chords. The overall harmony of Botticelli's nine figures is so dynamic that as we gaze upon his painted music, we identify now one theme, then another, for such music is rich in compositional nuances that we never fully fathom.

Botticelli's compositional modulations depend on subtle inflections of form. He weaves his figures together meaningfully, for example, when he unites the powerful downward sweep of Zephyr's left arm extended toward Chloris in desire to the goddess' right arm which reaches downward and away as she flees. This axis of form is perceived as the very antithesis of that in the figure of Mercury, whose limbs and draperies swirl heavenward. As Chloris is transformed into Flora, flowers flowing forth from her mouth, her limbs overlap Flora, the lower part of her upraised left arm rhyming with the corresponding part of Flora's downturned right arm. As Flora steps in the direction of Venus, we see how her left arm mirrors in its downward slope the parallel position of Venus' same arm, thereby creating a meaningful identity between these two goddesses of fertility.

These compositional conjunctions can be multiplied seemingly ad infinitum. The dress of Chloris in translucent drapery revealing the body is visually linked to the similar garb of the Graces on the other side of Venus. The downward dance-like step of Flora is reciprocated by that of the Grace next to Mercury. The disposition of the three Graces is essentially the rotation in space of the same figure seen from different angles all at once, as if the artist were artfully displaying the manner in which the painter, unlike the sculptor, can simultaneously present a body from different points of view! The extended, upraised arms of the Graces are a prelude, leading to the upraised arm, higher still, of Mercury, and all of these human limbs are figurative counterparts of the limbs of the trees behind them.

Analysis by no means exhausts the rich counterpoint of Botticelli's painting, and one can return to it time and again

to discover other ingenious harmonies of form. Having begun to acknowledge the picture's complex compositional design and the artifice that serves the painter's visible or visible meaning, we can turn our attention to some of Botticelli's literary sources, which, although conventionally discussed, are still inadequately appreciated in terms of the artist's own pictorial imagination.

The first of these is the well-known passage from Ovid's calendar poem *Fasti*, which celebrates the Floralia or festival of Flora. Rereading this passage in relation to the *Primavera*, we need to attend here not merely to Ovid's influence on Botticelli but more significantly to his transformation of Ovid's words into his own artistic terms. We should heed more fully the painter's own poetic imagination as he reimagines Ovid.

In Ovid's poem, Flora, who was Chloris, speaks and, as she does so, she breathes forth roses. She tells how it was spring when Zephyr saw her. Pursuing her, the wind god possessed her and, making amends for his violence, he made Flora his bride. Of these nuptial circumstances, she remarks, she has no complaints, for she enjoys perpetual spring. Ovid's story of Flora is a variant of the Greek myth of Persephone abducted by Pluto, but a comparison of the *Primavera* to Rembrandt's violent and horrifying rendering of the rape of Persephone, for example, underscores the degree to which Botticelli has domesticated the myth, sublimating its violence into beauty.

Ovid, we need to recall, does not describe Chloris' metamorphosis into Flora in *Fasti*. He only suggests it when he speaks of the translingual transformation of the chi in the nymph's Greek name into an *f*, thus rendering Chloris as Floris, that is, Flora in Latin. In order to make this transformation visible Botticelli invokes the story of Apollo and Daphne in *Metamorphoses*, an especially appropriate fable, since Daphne is similarly transformed into plant form. Botticelli's allusion to Apollo and Daphne is also especially fitting because when Apollo pursued the nymph he was also borne upon "wings of love," which are now wittily conflated with

Zephyr's pinions. The manner in which the wind god is pictured in the *Primavera* as suspended over the nymph's back, her hair blowing in the wind, recalls in *Metamorphoses* Apollo similarly suspended over the shoulders of the fleeing Daphne, her hair streaming over her neck.

What has Botticelli accomplished here? He has metamorphosed literature into visive poetry and, doing so, he has transformed one Ovidian text into another, a very Ovidian thing to do if we recall the way in which the poet likewise transformed his story of Apollo into the similar fable of Pan and Syrinx in book 1 of *Metamorphoses*. The fusion of two myths in the *Primavera* is charged with implicit irony, for whereas Apollo is thwarted in his pursuit of Daphne, Zephyr has his way with Chloris.

The analysis of Ovid's texts, or rather Botticelli's creative, synthesizing use of them, has by no means been exhausted. There are details in Ovid that Botticelli transforms significantly for his own purposes. Whereas Ovid describes flowers issuing from Flora's mouth as she speaks, Botticelli shows the flowers as signs of metamorphosis as they flow from the lips of Chloris, who is only beginning to become Flora (fig. 8). This metamorphosis is the visive analogue of Ovid's word-play in which Chloris' name, which means "green," becomes Flora. Botticelli does not show us the transformation of words, but the metamorphosis of the nymph who personifies the green fields into the personification of flowers. Whereas Ovid's Apollo, to whom Botticelli alludes in his Zephyr, breathed upon Daphne's hair, the painter now momentarily transforms this detail by showing the god breathing directly into the nymph's mouth from which flowers flow forth.

Fine lines of breath, *spiritus*, radiate from Zephyr's mouth and flow into Chloris', recalling the biblical sense of *spiritus* as the breath which gives life. When Botticelli's younger friend Michelangelo showed God in the act of creating Adam he invoked God's identity as *Creator Spiritus* by showing *spiritus* as the wind swirling around the Creator (fig. 9), through his drapery and beard, in order to evoke his very identity as spirit at the moment of the creation of life, when





Figure 1 Botticelli, *La Primavera*. Florence, Uffizi. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 2 Paolo Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano in 1432*. London, National Gallery.  
(Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 3 Verrocchio, *David*. Florence, Museo Nazionale.  
(Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 4 Botticelli, *Pallas Athena and the Centaur*.  
Florence, Uffizi. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)





Figure 5 Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi*. Florence, Uffizi.  
(Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 6 Pontormo, *Vertumnus and Pomona*. Poggio a Caiano, Villa Medicea.  
(Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 7 Titian, *Fête Champêtre*. Paris, Louvre.  
(Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 8 Botticelli, *La Primavera* (detail). Florence, Uffizi.  
(Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)





Figure 9 Michelangelo, *Creation of Adam*. Vatican, Sistine Chapel.  
(Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 10 Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*. Florence, Uffizi.  
(Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 11 Botticelli, *Annunciation*. Florence, Uffizi. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 12 Arcimboldo, *La Primavera*. Paris, Louvre.  
(Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 13 Dosso Dossi, *Jupiter, Mercury, and Virtue*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie. (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)





Figure 14 Piero di Cosimo, *Faun with a Dead Nymph*.  
London, National Gallery



Figure 15 Piero di Cosimo, *Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs* (detail). London, National Gallery.



Figure 16 Botticelli, Illustration of Matilda in *Purgatorio* 28 (detail from drawing). Berlin, Staatliche Museen.



he inspires Adam. Michelangelo borrowed for his figure of God the similar Zephyr, the personification of *spiritus*, in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (fig. 10), a figure affiliated with the Zephyr of *Primavera*, which the painter conceived in relation to the wind-filled angel of the *Annunciation* for the hospital of San Martino alla Scala, shown at the very moment of incarnation when Mary is filled with spirit (fig. 11).

Botticelli's image of impregnation in the *Primavera* is not so purely spiritual as in images of the *Annunciation*. For unlike the angel of the *Annunciation* who is the messenger to Mary, Zephyr takes physical possession of Chloris, in an act of intercourse that results not in incarnation as such but in what we might speak of instead as florification. Here we come to the heart of what is so extraordinary in Botticelli's picture. For by departing from Ovid's Apollo breathing upon Daphne's hair and from Flora's florid speech, he shows us—and what else can we call it?—an imaginary form of “oral sex.” An *aura seminalis*! When Zephyr penetrates the nymph, impregnating her through the mouth, she in turn, simultaneously and miraculously, gives birth to her new floral self through the very lips through which insemination has taken place.

Consider the marvel that Botticelli has wrought in his fusion of spirit, flesh, and flora, for we now behold in the *Primavera* a confusion of flower and flesh, of flora and fauna. Playing with the conventions of allegorical personification, Botticelli shows human form giving birth to flowers in what can only be described, at bottom, as a grotesque—an exalted form of poetic play. To move beyond our familiarity with Botticelli's image to the contemplation of what it wondrously manifests, we must conclude that it is no less strange and fabulous than Arcimboldo's personification of Spring as a floral portrait (fig. 12).

The fusion of flora and fauna in the *Primavera* is rooted in the analogy between the propagation of plants and the procreation of human beings, an analogy found in common speech, as when sperm is spoken of as seed or the female genitalia as a flower. If propagation leads us to the world of agri-

culture, of farming, as we have seen, procreation is germane to the immediate context of the picture, which, we learn from Medici inventories, was originally part of a *lettuccio* or bed, the very place of the family's procreation or multiplication of its seed. The theme of Flora as bride and "mother," as Ovid calls her in the story of marriage and birth, is a kind of pictorial epithalamium. Whether painted specifically for a marriage or not, the *Primavera's* theme of procreation is appropriate to a bed. It is a kind of augury or talisman that confers fruitfulness upon the family for whom it was painted.

Both propagation and procreation, which are linked in the idea of the family's fertility and fruitfulness, are also associated with the very idea of art. Indeed, art is described in the Renaissance in terms of both plant and animal reproduction. Michelangelo, Vasari tells us, for example, demonstrated "the first flowers and fruits" of his art when he carved a Faun—most significantly in a garden, indeed the Medici garden—and Ovid long before made such an analogy between procreation and art when in *Fasti*, invoking the boon of Flora's powers, he expressed the hope that his poem would "bloom forever." Art is, at the same time, conceived as a form of propagation in the Renaissance, whether in the suggestion that *disegno* is the father of art, *invenzione* its mother, or in Michelangelo's assertion, also reported in Vasari's pages, that his works of art were his "children."

The analogy between procreation, propagation, and poetry (or art) is made explicit in the very passage of Zephyr, Chloris, and Flora in the *Primavera* where Botticelli demonstrates his artistic *virtù* by artfully metamorphosing Ovidian texts into visible form as part of his story of procreation and propagation. He implies that his *poesis* is the analogue of the procreation and propagation he pictures. The *Primavera*, we might say, is the very fruit and flower of his art, his very child, born of the union of invention and design.

Botticelli's procreative or propagational poetry is nowhere more vivid than in the way in which he shows us the silhouettes of flowers forming on the dress of Chloris before she is Flora, here the very identity of *poesis* and procreation. These

flowers, not fully formed or grown, still *non finiti*, have yet to reach the finish and maturity of those upon the fabric of Flora. Part of the artifice of Botticelli's conceit lies in the ambiguity of Chloris' flowers, which can be seen either as those grown on the grass, seen through her dress, or as the incipient forms of flowers forming directly upon her dress but not yet fully made or mature. In Botticelli's conceit, procreation and poetry are one.

Botticelli's implied parallel between the *poesis* or birth of his art and the creation or recreation of nature has its deep roots in the notion of God as artist or maker and its corollary of the artist as like God, the Creator of nature. When Botticelli paints flowers, revealing the way he gives form to them, he compares in a kind of *paragone* (or similitude) his *poesis* or "making" of them with that of God who created the world and life upon it. Comparing his *poesis* to God's, Botticelli is incipiently divine, and only a short time later Vasari, comparing Michelangelo's painting to God's creation, would refer to Michelangelo as similarly *divino*. The analogy between divine making and poetic making is seen in other paintings of the period, for example, Dosso Dossi's picture of Jupiter painting butterflies (fig. 13). By implication, Dosso the artist is like God the painter, and the ambiguity of the butterfly that seems to come alive upon the fictive canvas of Dosso's picture, like Botticelli's vivid floral imitations, heightens our sense of the painter's divine powers.

Botticelli's display of poetry as the metamorphosis of nature, his exhibition of the metamorphosis of nature as the display of poetry, is also not unrelated to the classically inspired Renaissance fables of artists raised directly in the very nature they recreated—above all, the story of Giotto, the young shepherd discovered drawing sheep in the sand with a stone. Such pastoral stories, eclogues in a way, have their affinity to the *pastorali* of the Venetian painters where rude herdsmen or shepherds join in song. If the world of the *Prima-vera* is far more refined or exquisite than the hills where the young Giotto flourished or the greenworld into which the Venetians introduced their nymphs and rustics, it is itself a

pictorial georgic, no less primordial, for it is the realm of the *mater* Flora, the very type of "mother nature."

Our understanding of the *Primavera* depends in part on our sense of its multiple connotations of birth. An image of the rebirth of nature conceived as the flowering of art, the painting is also a rebirth of classical myth and poetry. This revival is understood in relation to the modern, for the *Primavera* is a transformation of the ancient idiom into the *dolce stil nuovo*. It has always been observed that the beautiful women beheld in Botticelli's bower evoke the *donne angelicate*, the angelic women, of Tuscan love poetry, their gentility, sweet grace, and spiritual aura. Extending from Dante and Petrarch to Poliziano and Lorenzo il Magnifico, such poetry reworked the conventions of classical antiquity into a new, more spiritualized poetry, wherein the beloved has the virtues of Mary, queen of the court of heaven. Botticelli's Venus, it has been justly said, has the aura of the Virgin to whom Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura are similarly linked.

As in Tuscan poetry, the *Primavera* inspires thoughts of spiritual renewal or recreation. The poet describes his "new life" or *recreation*, in the root sense of the word, when he is spiritually renewed, "transfigured" as Dante says, by his ethereal beloved. This love is the origin of the poet's writing, for his poetry is the record of his love for the beloved who inspires his song. By transposing the spiritual beauty of the beautiful women of Tuscan poetry into visible terms, their flashing eyes, radiance, and grace, Botticelli encourages the viewer of the *Primavera* to contemplate the theme of spiritual recreation and its inspiration of poetry. Once again, in a very deep sense, Botticelli's picture is about the origins of poetry.

By evoking the experience of spiritual recreation in concert with the very recreation of nature herself, Botticelli implicitly alludes to the idea of physical healing. For his fictive garden, like real gardens of the Renaissance, is filled with countless flowers—roses, crocuses, irises, cornflowers, violets, and daisies—many of which possess, according to tradition, health-giving properties. The *Primavera* thus has connotations of

both spiritual and physical revivification, and its spiritual character can never be totally divorced from the physical roots of which we have already spoken, those of agriculture, which is closely tied to the correlative, pharmaco-peial "art" of medicine.

Botticelli's theme of birth or rebirth, physical or spiritual, is part of the very cycle of life, which culminates necessarily in death, and we must recall in this regard that in the tradition of the spiritualized love poetry he evokes, the poet records the remembrance of a lady who is now dead. His poetry is profoundly elegiac, is itself elegy. We find such "minor tones" in Botticelli's picture, in the sadness with which he has conceived the goddess of pleasure and her wistful attendants, the Graces, who stand apart from the smiling Flora, jocund in her fertility. Whereas in Tuscan lyric the poet expresses *his* sorrow in bittersweet memory of the beloved, Botticelli transposes such sadness to the image of the beautiful women who inspire love, metamorphosing the poet-lover's sentiment into the haunting specters of the deceased. In the more conventional painted elegies to which Botticelli picture is tied, the emotion of pathos is still that of the bereaved lover, as in Piero di Cosimo's *Faun with a Dead Nymph* (fig. 14) or the passage of the same painter's *Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs* (fig. 15), where a centauress tenderly cradles her dead lover.

Moving beyond the general associations of the *Primavera* to Tuscan poetry, we find a particularly striking analogy to Botticelli's image in Dante's depiction of the earthly paradise of *Purgatorio*, where the poet beholds the lady Matilda, the antetype of the Marian Beatrice. As in the *Primavera*, she appears in a place suggestive of the golden age, a divine forest that, giving perpetual shade, is filled with little flowers. Like Botticelli's Flora, she smiles radiantly, emitting an aura of grace and, like Flora and the Graces, she dances to a sweet sound which, although unheard, is evoked in the poet's own song. To the poet this lady recalls Persephone, the very type of Botticelli's Flora, and the light of her eyes bring to mind Venus, the superintending deity of Botticelli's image.

The still underestimated Dantesque depths of Botticelli's picture are deepened by consideration of the artist's drawing of the earthly paradise which formed part of his visual commentary to the *Divine Comedy* made for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici (fig. 16). By showing Matilda with her arm, slightly bent, pointing heavenward as she faces Dante and his fellow poets, Botticelli invokes her discourse on the Supreme Good. Twice the poet refers to how Matilda seeks "to uncloud the intellect," to dispel the *nebbia* upon Dante's mind. This is of course a figure of speech, but a significant one that brings us back to the climactic figure of Mercury in the *Primavera*.

Close scrutiny of Botticelli's figure of Mercury in relation to his rendering of Matilda reveals that Mercury's raised arm is virtually identical to hers. There is a fundamental difference, however, between their gestures. Although Mercury's index finger points indicatively heavenward like Matilda's, he is holding a staff or caduceus, whereas her hand is empty. It has often been said that Mercury is skimming the clouds with his staff, but Botticelli offers us precise visual evidence that the god is doing something more. For he conspicuously paints the reflection of the Sun in Mercury's eyes, another instance of heavenly conjunction in Botticelli's picture, which points toward the meaning of Mercury's gesture. In order to see the light of the Sun, he must dispel the clouds above, which is exactly what he is doing with his staff. In his drawing of Matilda Botticelli does not make visible Dante's figure of speech, "to uncloud the intellect," but in the *Primavera* in a detail that is *sui generis* in the visible speech of painting, he makes this poetic figure of speech indeed visible.

If Mercury is a god of spring, "harbinger of spring," as Rossetti once called him in his poem on the *Primavera*, he is a divine lover, a meaning conveyed by the flames upon his garment, the flames of love. Whereas Zephyr's love of Chloris was carnal, Mercury's love is platonically contemplative, spiritual, and intellectual as he gazes in rapture at the Sun, the idea of the Beautiful of which we see but a metaphorical reflection in the light in Mercury's eyes. Like the god's up-

raised hand which dispels the clouds of the intellect, the beauty of Botticelli's picture itself elevates the beholder's spirit toward the idea of the Beautiful, the apprehension of which will in effect be the beholder's own ultimate metamorphosis or rebirth.

Evoking a transcendental pulchritude beyond anything we can know in this world, Botticelli creates an earthly counterpart of such transcendence in the concinnity of his artful visionary image of beauteous beings in a superbly beautiful place, a paradise where it is always spring. Rooted in intertwined visions of love, the *Primavera* is a fusion of Ovidian metamorphosis, Platonic ascent, and Dantesque transcendence, a deep unity of poetry, philosophy, theology, and psychology, a fusion of genres, georgic, epithalamium, and elegy, an exquisite association, as we have seen, of many arts: agriculture, horticulture, medicine, poetry, painting, tapestry, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, and even carpentry, since, we recall, it was painted for a bed, a place to sleep and dream under the enchanted star of Venus. In its multiple evocations of the origins of poetry, as if the dream of the beginnings of love and poetry, of the very poetry of love, the *Primavera* is one of the most sublimely evocative, associative, allusive, and deeply imaginative visions of the Italian Renaissance, indeed in the entire story of art, poetry, and imagination.

#### NOTE

There is a vast body of learned writing on Botticelli's *Primavera* which extends from Aby Warburg to Gombrich and extends through more recent scholarship in a series of variations on established themes. Since all writers on painting select what interests them, no bibliography is complete. Rather than reviewing that literature imperfectly here, which would be otiose, I refer the reader to R. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli* 2 vols. (London 1978) for an ample preliminary review. A convenient listing of many of the recent monographs on the *Primavera* is given by P. Barolsky and A. Barriault, "Botticelli's *Primavera* and the Origins of the Elegiac in Italian Renaissance Painting," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (September 1996), note 1. I should emphasize that whereas previous scholarship dwells primarily on the texts that influenced Botticelli, I am more interested here in the painter's own poetic imagination and poetic sense of form, the ways in which he imaginatively employs his literacy sources.