VISUAL CULTURE IN EARLY MODERNITY

Series Editor: Allison Levy

A forum for the critical inquiry of the visual arts in the early modern world. Visual Culture in Early Modernity promotes new models of inquiry and new narratives of early modern art and its history. We welcome proposals for both monographs and essay collections which consider the cultural production and reception of images and objects. The range of topics covered in this series includes, but is not limited to, painting, sculpture and architecture as well as material objects, such as domestic furnishings, religious and/or ritual accessories, costume, scientific/medical apparata, erotica, ephemera and printed matter. We seek innovative investigations of western and non-western visual culture produced between 1400 and 1800.

Sex Acts in Early Modern Italy
Practice, Performance, Perversion, Punishment

Edited by Allison Levy

ASHGATE
Peaches and figs: bisexual eroticism in the paintings and burlesque poetry of Bronzino

Will Fisher

The current title of Bronzino's Allegory with Venus and Cupid of 1543 (Figure 10.1) can be traced back at least as far as the National Gallery's first catalog, which was published shortly after the museum opened in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the catalog, the title of Bronzino's painting is listed as 'Venus, Cupid, and Time - an Allegory.' Although this title is slightly different from the one normally used today, it nevertheless anticipates the current title insofar as it insists that the painting is 'an Allegory.' It is worth pointing out that the title listed in the catalog was apparently chosen as a means of downplaying the painting's sensuality. The National Gallery's first director, Charles Eastlake, who purchased the painting for the museum in 1860 from a collector in Paris, wrote a letter to one of his colleagues in which he advises him to select a title for the painting that emphasizes the allegorical elements of the composition. Eastlake points out that although some people, including the former owner, claim that the image is 'voluptuous,' he believes that the 'allegory is moral.' He also insists that the catalog not make any reference to the 'sensual' aspect of the painting because 'if there is any description which can be quoted and misrepresented you will have clergymen and others interfering and making out a bad case.' Despite Eastlake's belief in the 'morality' of the image, he nonetheless commissioned an artist to paint over Venus's nipple and tongue, and to paint a myrtle branch over Cupid's bottom; these additions were not removed until the middle of the twentieth century.

In 1939, the allegorical reading of Bronzino's painting was further fleshed out by Erwin Panofsky in Studies in Iconology. To this day, Panofsky's interpretation remains the starting point for most scholarly analysis. Panofsky identifies the central couple as Venus and Cupid: Venus at the compositional center, and Cupid kneeling on the left on a soft pink cushion ('a common symbol of idleness and lechery'), simultaneously treading on a pair of Venus' doves (associated with lust, or alternatively, conjugal...
The putto on the right is Pleasure: he throws a bouquet of pink rosebuds and wears an anklet of bells. If these figures are all, in Panofsky’s words, ‘exquisitely lascivious,’ he claims that the image as a whole is meant to be a moralistic indictment of sensual pleasure. Consequently, the three central figures are surrounded by others who show love’s ‘dangers and tortures.’ The ‘elderly woman madly tearing her hair’ on the left side of the composition is, according to Panofsky, Jealousy or Despair, and the woman on the right, behind the putto, is Fraud or Deceit. This figure has the mask-like face of a young girl and wears a sumptuous green dress and pink cloak, but these voluptuous garments cannot cover her serpent’s body/tail and her sphinx-like claw. With one hand, she offers a honeycomb, while in the other she conceals a scorpion’s stinger behind her back. Panofsky notes, moreover, that the hand attached to her right arm is in reality a left hand, and that the hand attached to the left arm is in reality a right one, so that the figure offers sweetness with what seems to be her ‘good’ hand but is really her ‘evil one, and hides poison in what seems to be her ‘evil’ hand but is really her ‘good’ one.

Thus, ‘[w]e are presented here with the most sophisticated symbol of perverted duplicity ever devised by an artist.’ Moreover, the entire scene is witnessed by the two figures at the top of the composition and the two masks in the bottom right corner. The female figure in the top left corner looks on with an expression of horror. Panofsky labels her Night, though others have said she represents Virtue. The old man is Time, an hourglass on his right shoulder. Both of these figures are engaged in the ambiguous activity of revealing/revealing the scene before them.

These are the rudiments of the moralized allegorical reading sketched by Panofsky in 1939. Although this interpretation is still dominant today, there are some art historians who have argued for a different interpretation of Bronzino’s painting. They contend that the image is ‘essentially erotic,’ and that Bronzino incorporates the allegorical elements in a playful or ironic manner. Michael Levey, who served as Director of the National Gallery from 1973 to 1986, argues that it is not an ‘allegory of lechery or luxury,’ but a representation of the ‘triumph of Venus’ or of ‘Cupid disarmed by Venus.’ As Sydney Freedberg puts it, the painting ‘pretends to be a moral demonstration of which its actual content is the reverse.’ Paul Barolsky and Andrew Ladis lament the fact that scholars have lost sight of the painting’s pleasures: they decry the fact that interpretation has ‘devolved into a joyless academic parlor game, whose purpose is to crack the code of the painter’s allegorical language; critics attempt to understand Bronzino’s words without hearing his voice. It is a voice whose tone is ironic and disingenuous.’ To be fair, Panofsky himself acknowledges the painting’s pleasures. He notes that the image presents the viewers with a ‘licentious scene,’ and that it is intended to ‘show the pleasures of love.’ Still, Panofsky focuses primarily on explaining the allegorical
meanings of the figures, and he speaks about the painting’s ‘sensuality’ in only the vaguest terms. Oddly, many of the critics who contest Panofsky’s moralizing interpretation follow him in this regard. They often simply call attention to the painting’s ‘erotic theme’, or at their most explicit, they say the image has ‘homoerotic aspects,’ or that it depicts the ‘incestuous love of Venus and Cupid.’

Instead of engaging in the ongoing debate about whether Bronzino’s Allegory of Venus and Cupid is ultimately intended to be moralizing or erotic, what I propose to do here is to provide a more detailed analysis of its eroticism. In particular, I will argue that Bronzino’s painting offers both Venus and Cupid to the viewer as sexual objects, and that its ‘sensuality’ might therefore be described as ‘bisexual.’ Venus’ nude body is at the compositional center and is the obvious focus of attention, but Cupid is also explicitly eroticized. In fact, Bronzino apparently altered his initial composition in order to increase Cupid’s sensual allure. Originally, Cupid’s body was not on display; it was hidden behind Venus’s body. It was as if Cupid were seated behind Venus, and the part of his body that is now his buttocks was formerly his knees.

Bronzino’s new arrangement markedly intensified Cupid’s sexual appeal. This is mostly a result of Cupid’s provocative contrapposto pose, which focuses the viewer’s attention on his protruding posterior. In addition, Bronzino added the gilded quiver hanging off of Cupid’s back; this object simulates anal penetration in a none-too-subtle fashion. Finally, Bronzino added the flowery herb that grows up to toward Cupid’s bottom from the bottom left-hand corner of the composition; this plant has been identified as verbena officinalis or herba Veneris (with obvious erotic connotations).

If Bronzino’s Allegory, thus, offers both Venus and Cupid to the viewer as sexual objects, it is worth pointing out that Bronzino later produced another portrait of Venus and Cupid in which this ‘bisexual’ eroticism was even more explicit. Venus and Cupid and a Satyr was completed sometime around 1553-54 and is now on display in one of the galleries of the Palazzo Colonna in Rome (Figure 10.2). In this painting, the nude bodies of Venus and Cupid are again portrayed as potential sources of pleasure for the viewer, but this time there are no allegorical elements included in the composition, so the erotic nature of the image is more evident. Moreover, Venus and Cupid both lie in suggestive positions, and they lie parallel to one another as if to indicate that they are two parallel roads to pleasure.

Crucially, this version of the painting also includes a satyr who stands in for the voyeuristic spectator and who gazes lustfully at the central pair. The satyr’s lechery is clearly signaled by his wagging tongue, his leering eyes, and his grasping hand, but significantly, it is impossible to tell who the satyr is looking at: his gaze cuts diagonally across both figures from Cupid’s bottom to Venus’ lap, and then, appropriately enough, to the tip of the arrow that Venus holds.

The similarities between Bronzino’s two Venus and Cupid paintings are readily apparent. Like Venus and Cupid and a Satyr, the Allegory is organized around a central diagonal axis. In fact, the composition features two of
So if the London Allegory is ultimately quite coy about the voyeuristic pleasures that it offers, the crucial point for my purposes is that Bronzino makes a point in both of his Venus and Cupid paintings of incorporating an eroticized male figure and an eroticized female figure into the same frame. Some might argue that these images are nevertheless not ‘bisexual’ because each of these figures is meant to appeal to a different viewer – Venus to heterosexual (male) viewers, and Cupid to homosexual (male) viewers.15 While the paintings do not preclude this type of viewing, I have argued that it is more likely that Bronzino intended both eroticized figures to appeal to a single viewer, and that the paintings, therefore, suggest an erotic continuity between the desire for women and the desire for boys. This reading is substantiated by the Palazzo Colonna version since it includes only one voyeur/viewer figure in it, and his gaze slides across the bodies of both Venus and Cupid.

If we want to better understand the eroticism of Bronzino’s paintings, we need to put it in its proper historical context. In this case, I believe that an important part of that context is the debates from the period about whether women or boys provide more sexual pleasure. This type of ‘debate’ appears to have been popular in early modern Italy. The genre, can, however, be traced back to classical antiquity.16 The best-known classical example is Plutarch’s Eroticus (sometimes also called the Erotikon), which takes the form of a dialogue between two male characters: one is an advocate of the love of women, and the other an advocate of the love of boys. A second well-known classical example is the Erotes, which was previously attributed to Lucian, but is now thought to have been written by an imitator sometime in the fourth century CE. This text is actually a romance-like narrative, but at one point in the middle of the story, two of the characters – Charicles and Callirrhétidas – engage in a debate where they discuss the pleasures to be had with women and boys.17

This type of debate continued to be popular throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance.18 The most extensive early modern example is found in Antonio Rocco’s L’Alcibiade fancuillo a scola (c. 1652). Rocco was a friar who taught philosophy at a convent in Venice, and his book is structured as a pseudo-philosophical dialogue between Alcibiades and his teacher Filotimo. At one point, the pupil asks his teacher, ‘tell me, I pray you, whether women or boys provide more sexual pleasure. This type of ‘debate’ appears to have been popular in early modern Italy. The genre, can, however, be traced back to classical antiquity.16 The best-known classical example is Plutarch’s Eroticus (sometimes also called the Erotikon), which takes the form of a dialogue between two male characters: one is an advocate of the love of women, and the other an advocate of the love of boys. A second well-known classical example is the Erotes, which was previously attributed to Lucian, but is now thought to have been written by an imitator sometime in the fourth century CE. This text is actually a romance-like narrative, but at one point in the middle of the story, two of the characters – Charicles and Callirrhétidas – engage in a debate where they discuss the pleasures to be had with women and boys.17

If Rocco’s L’Alcibiade is, therefore, less dialogic than the earlier texts in this genre, there are other sources from the Renaissance that are more in line with the classical tradition. Take, as an example, the dueling poems by Francesco Berni and Francesco Molza of Modena that were included in sixteenth-century collections of Italian burlesque verse. These poems ostensibly compare the pleasures to be gotten from eating different types of fruit, but they are in fact thinly veiled comparisons of different types of erotic pleasure. First, in 1522, Berni wrote a ‘Capitola delle pesche’ (Encomium to peaches) in which he celebrates peaches, which were associated with boys’ bottoms. Then, in response, Molza wrote his own ‘Capitola de fichi’ (Encomium to figs) in praise of the vagina, which I will discuss below. Still later, Annibale Caro produced an elaborate mock-commentary on Molza’s poem.
Berni's 'Capitolo delle Pesche' begins with an acknowledgement that there are many different types of fruits and that they are all pleasing:

Tutte le frutte, in tutte le stagioni,
come dir nove... pere, mele, ciliegie e peperoni.
son bone, a chi le piace, secche e fresche;
ma, s'asseris ad esser giudice io,
le non hanno da fare] nulla con la pesche.

[All the fruits, in all the seasons,
such as apples... pears, plums, cherries and melons,
Are for those that like them, dried and fresh;
but if I were to be a judge,
they fall short of peaches.]

The fruits that Berni mentions here were all associated with eroticized body parts: apples with buttocks, pears with penises, plums with vaginas, cherries with the anus and melons with the bottom. Moreover, the line explaining that these fruits could be enjoyed either 'dry or fresh' was meant to be a playful allusion to different types of intercourse: anal (dry) and vaginal (fresh/wet). But if Berni's poem, thus, begins with an acknowledgment of the variety of erotic 'tastes' that people had during this period, the speaker eventually announces his own decided preference for peaches. He contends, moreover, that other people are coming to appreciate this fruit more and more. As he puts it,

Le pesche eran già cibo da prelati,
ma, perciò ad ognun piace i buon buoconi,
oggi non le pesche miro al frutti,
ché fanno l'istincione e l'orosioni.

[Peaches were for a long time food for prelates,
but since everyone likes a good meal,
even friars, who fast and pray,
crave for peaches today.]

Berni's 'Capitolo delle Pesche' might be compared to Rocco's L'Alcibiade since the speaker really only focuses on his 'taste' for peaches, but in this case, his poem's singular vision was eventually balanced by another burlesque poem – Francesco Molza's 'Capitolo de fichi,' which argues that figs are 'preferable to peaches and apples [the other fruit that was compared with boys buttocks];' and that 'men... cannot live without the precious fig."

If these poems indicate that debating the relative merits of sex with women and boys was still a popular pastime in early modern Italy, the crucial thing to note for my purposes is that Bronzino was almost certainly familiar with these mock-debates. His own poems appeared alongside Molza's 'Capitolo di fichi' in Il secondo libro dell'opere burlesche, a collection of burlesque poetry published in Florence in 1555; this volume was reprinted again in 1724 in London and then again in 1771 in Rome. And while Bronzino's verses do not seem to engage directly in these debates (like Berni's and Molza's do), they are, nevertheless, written in the same playful erotic style, and they certainly demonstrate a familiarity with these debates. His 'Capitolo primo in lode della galea,' for instance, describes life in the galley of a ship, where men were often condemned to row as punishment for committing a crime. In the poem, Bronzino portrays the galley as a 'carefree' and intensely homoerotic place, as Deborah Parker points out in her study of Bronzino's poetry. Indeed, Bronzino himself describes how 'there is little space between one person and another, and everyone is shaven and tanned, so that they look like mirrors.' Interestingly, the shaving abolishes the traditional distinctions between bearded men and beardless boys, making all of the men smooth like boys. Bronzino playfully adds that in this environment, 'boiled and roasted meats are hardly ever mixed.' This joke is based on a similar alimentary double entendre to the one about 'dried and fresh' fruit in Berni's poem: vaginal sex was likened to boiled meat (since it was wet) and anal sex to roasted meat (since it was dry). In this instance, Bronzino does not compare the two types of meat; instead, he wittily insists that the two types of meat are not mixed in this particular environment. This is not surprising given that there were no women on board the ship. Bronzino's quip also, of course, plays with the fact that the 'galley' was the name for the kitchen space on a ship.

If Bronzino's poetry suggests that he was familiar with the debates comparing women and boys as vehicles of sexual pleasure, I believe that his Venus and Cupid paintings might ultimately be seen as visual analogs for these debates. With Venus and Cupid and a Satyr, for instance, the question the painting playfully poses is if the Satyr—by extension the viewer—finds Venus or Cupid more attractive. The Satyr raises his right hand as if he were going to grab one of these figures, but which one is it? Cupid's plump buttocks and Venus's spherical breast both beckon; they lie along yet another diagonal axis that connects them with the Satyr's hand and runs more or less parallel to the line of the Satyr's gaze.

Bronzino's Venus and Cupid paintings were not the only early modern representations that incorporated this type of 'bisexual' imagery. The engraving that accompanied Aretino's 'Sonnet 14' from the l'Amor (Figure 10.3) presents viewers with a similar scenario—an eroticized male figure side by side with an eroticized female figure. Cupid's buttocks and those of the female figure lie adjacent to one another, and although the text of the sonnet does not explicitly eroticize Cupid or his posterior, it does include a more general encomium to the ass as a source of pleasure that may help to explain the prominence of this particular corporeal feature in the engraving.
For Aretino's 'Sonnet 14' does not fit easily within modern sexual taxonomies. The examples from Entklw,,,,u,tMlcg,,,H E E E {uolBc,tricepmt, l"dO N ~OIl.~Ilf=ttocfri#o'tm4J It _"io

'relative merits of women and boys as objects of pleasure were debated,10.3 Illustration

10.3 Illustration

for Aretino's

Sonnet 14' from I modi

'Ch'io va fatter in potta, e non in culo
Costei, che mi to'l cazzo, e me ne rido.'30 If the speaker insists that he prefers vaginal penetration in this particular instance, his formulation clearly acknowledges the possibility of a choice of orifices. It is worth saying that there are many other poems in the I modi that also playfully compare anal and vaginal intercourse. In fact, 'Sonnet 7' thematizes this type of comparison. It begins with the female figure asking her male partner, "O 'lmetterete voi? ... Dritto, o dinanzi?''31 (Where will you put it ... behind or in front?), and as the poem continues, the man goes on to explicitly discuss the pleasures of the 'potta' and the 'cuc.'

If the identification of Bronzino's Venus and Cupid paintings resonates powerfully with the engraving from Aretino's I modi and with the other early modern sources where the eroticism of Bronzino's paintings troubles our modem sexual categories.

While I have described this eroticism as 'bisexual' throughout this essay, it is worth noting that there are at least two important reasons why this designation is not appropriate. First, the male figures in both of Bronzino's paintings are extremely young and, like the figures in the debates, would undoubtedly be described as 'boys.' Thus, the homoeroticism offered in these images appears to be structured around an age/power hierarchy, and it, therefore, differs quite radically from the egalitarian form of homosexuality that is currently idealized in Western culture. Second, when we use the term 'bisexual' today, we use it to refer equally to both men and women. It is not clear, however, that this is true of the desire evoked by Bronzino's paintings. In fact, it would at first glance appear as if Bronzino imagines the voyeuristic viewer of his paintings to be a man, at least insofar as the satyr in Venus and Cupid and a Satyr is clearly coded as masculine. The question, then, is if this is just random or if it is more significant? Would Bronzino (or for that matter other people from the period) have imagined that a woman could have occupied the position of the 'bisexual' voyeur even though he does not include that possibility in the painting itself? It is worth saying that there are two female voyeur figures in the London Allegory. First, there is Night/Virtue, who looks at the central couple with an expression of surprise or horror. And second, there is the female mask at the bottom right-hand corner of the image who may at first seem to be looking at Venus and Cupid, but upon closer inspection, it turns out that her 'gaze' is averted from the scene. Thus, neither of these female figures actually seems to get pleasure from what she is viewing. So the question remains: were 'bisexual' pleasures thought to appeal to women as well as men? And if so, did women take the same pleasure in these images as men did? For now, these questions must remain unanswered, but I hope that the eroticism that they will highlight the difficulties that arise when we try and understand the eroticism of Bronzino's paintings, and how it relates to our own desires.

Notes


3 Janet Cox-Reearick points out that the moralizing interpretation is still dominant: as she puts it, "[a]ll interpretations of the painting, regardless of differences in the identification of the figures, [tend to] emphasize ... in "series of moralizing messages." See The Collections of François I: Royal Treasures (New York: The Metropolitan, 1996), p. 231. On the other hand, Sydney J. Freedberg maintains that the painting has an 'essentially erotic content.' See Painting in Italy, 1500–1600 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 436.

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This is not to imply that women and boys were not distinguished from each other. The original composition was revealed using x-radiographic techniques. See Freedberg, *Painting in Italy*, p. 435.


Iris Cheney, "Bronzino’s London Allegory: Venus, Cupid, Virtue, and Time," *Source* 6/2 (1987): 12-18, esp. 17. Carol Piazzotta and Larry Keith, "Bronzino’s ‘Allegory’: New Evidence for the Artist’s Revisions," *The Burlington Magazine* 141/1151 (February 1999): 89-99, esp. 98. While scholars regularly comment on the homoeroticism of Bronzino’s paintings, the tendency is to tie this to the ‘tastes of his principle patron, Cosimo I, who almost certainly commissioned the allegory.’ This is useful, but it does tend to limit the discussion of the painting’s homoeroticism by insisting on a private rather than a public interpretation. Indeed, it could be argued that ‘outing’ an artist (or, in this case, his patron) works to contain the more radical implications of the homoeroticism in the artworks by localizing it in a specific individual as opposed to understanding it as a social phenomenon with broader cultural implications. For a thought-provoking discussion of the homoeroticism of the image that resists this tendency, see Robert W. Gaston, *Love’s Sweet Poison: A New Reading of Bronzino’s London Allegory*, *I Tatti Review* 4 (1991): 249-88, esp. 287.

This chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of the painting’s eroticism. There are a number of fascinating elements of its sensuality that do not discuss at all here, such as the incest theme, and the dynamics of erotic activity and passivity. For a brief discussion of the ‘incestuous overtones’ of the painting, see Richard McCabe’s *Richard McCabe’s Incest, Drama and Nature’s Law 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Dmytra Callaghan’s *Unnatural Loving: Swine, Pets, and Flowers in Venus and Adonis*, *Early Modern Culture: An Electronic Seminar* 3 (2003): paragraphs 27-8.

The original composition was revealed using x-radiographic techniques. See Piazzotta and Keith, *Bronzino’s ‘Allegory’*. p. 94.

Plazzotta and Keith, "Bronzino’s ‘Allegory’": p. 96, credit Jennifer Preston with having identified the plant for them. The pink jewel that is located in the middle of Cupid’s back is also suggestive of the pleasures that lie below. Indeed, its coloring echoes the coloring of the rosebuds that Pleasure holds in his hands, thus establishing a symbolic parallel between the two items.

This is not to imply that women and boys were not distinguished from each other as sexual objects, or that there was no culturally recognized distinction between heteroeroticism and homoeroticism. In my opinion, scholars have sometimes been too quick to assume that the gender of the partners was completely insignificant, as Lisa Jardine does when she argues that in early modern English culture eroticism was not gender-specific. ... [and] is not grounded in the sex of the possibly "submissive" partner, but ... [in] the expectation that very submissiveness." See Lisa Jardine, *Travesties: Gender, Dependency and Sexual Availability in Twelfth Night*, *In Erotic Politics: Desire on the English Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (*Routledge*, 1992), pp. 27-38, esp. pp. 34-5.


Much more could be said about the painting’s evocation and denial of voyeuristic pleasure. The other obvious voyeuristic viewer of the amorous scene is Night/Virtue in the upper left-hand corner of the composition. Her evident distress about the scene she is witnessing might be taken to suggest that this is the ‘proper’ response for the (female?) viewer, but it is also possible that viewers were supposed to dis-identify with her indignation, or even to take pleasure in her shock.

This assumes a male audience. While this is to some extent justified by the fact that all of the voyeur figures in Bronzino’s paintings are male—satyr, the mask, Time, even Pleasure—It is, nevertheless, important to resist assuming that women and boys were only thought to be appealing to men. I return to this point in my conclusion.

Although I focus here primarily on examples from ancient Greece, Craig Williams contendsthat ‘the question continued to be of interest to Roman readers into the second century CE at least.’ See *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 26.

The Enotes is analyzed in some length by David Halperin in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 89–103.


Antonio Rocco, *Alcibiades the Schoolboy*, trans. J.C. Rawnsley (Amsterdam: Editions Entinos Press, 2000), pp. 61 and 63-4. It is worth saying that in Rocco’s text about the pleasures of sex with boys resonate powerfully with Bronzino’s paintings, most notably Filotimo’s celebration of the boys’ ‘velvet-smooth cushions’ and his emphasis, on p. 63, on the ‘pretty little ... channel that conducts you to the flowered garden of boyhood.’


"Divenni madre e figlia di mio padre": queer lactations in Renaissance and Baroque art
Jutta Sperling

In his altarpiece The Seven Acts of Mercy of 1606 (Figure 11.1), commissioned from the confraternity of Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples, Caravaggio rendered three of the seven charitable acts by reference to an anecdote in Valerius Maximus' collection of Memorable Doings and Sayings (c. 32 CE). Giving drink to the thirsty, feeding the hungry and assisting prisoners are in his painting embodied by Pero, ancient example of filial piety, who saved her father from starvation by putting him 'like a baby ... to her breast.'5 Myko (later mostly called Cimone), her father, was a Greek citizen condemned to death for capital crime. The story is told as an ekphrasis, emphasizing how the commemoration and re-presentation of Pero's milk-offer to her father evades words:

Men's eyes are riveted in amazement when they see the painting of this act and renew the features of the long bygone incident in astonishment at the spectacle now before them, believing that in those silent outlines of limbs they see living and breathing bodies. This must needs happen to the mind also, admonished to remember things long past although they were recent by painting, which is considerably more effective than literary memorials.7

Caravaggio's eye-catching rendering of an anxious woman offering her breast to an emaciated prisoner certainly qualifies as such a 'riveting' representation, giving rise to a veritable explosion of Pero-and-Cimone imagery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.3 Bartolomeo Manfredi's painting of what became known as the 'Roman Charity' was among the first images to be inspired by Caravaggio's altarpiece,4 even though his, as well as all subsequent renderings, show the event as a genre scene devoid of any religious connotation, and place the lactation scene in the intimate, womb-like space of the dungeon itself (Figure 11.2).

In his chapter devoted to examples of 'filial piety,' located at the very center of his collection, Maximus narrated another story of how a daughter saved

For this idea and for a discussion of Caro's mock commentary on Molza's poem, see David O. Frantz, Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), pp. 33 ff.

For information about the major collections of burlesque poetry, see Marzo, Note, pp. 7–12.


The extant engravings for Aretino's I modi date from the eighteenth century, and we cannot be sure that the engravings for the earlier editions were the same. For an excellent discussion of Aretino's I modi, see Bette Talvacchia's Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). I have used her translations of Aretino.

Talvacchia, Taking Positions, p. 221.

29 Talvacchia, Taking Positions, p. 207.

24 For this idea and for a discussion of Caro's mock commentary on Molza's poem, see David O. Frantz, Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), pp. 33 ff.

25 For information about the major collections of burlesque poetry, see Marzo, Note, pp. 7–12.


27 Parker, Bronzino, p. 28.

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