

CHRISTIAN MYSTERIES IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE:  
TYPOLOGY AND SYNCRETISM IN THE ART  
OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

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the Temple University Graduate Board

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

Christian Mysteries in the Italian Renaissance:  
Typology and Syncretism in the Art  
of the Italian Renaissance  
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Doctor of Philosophy  
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My dissertation studies the typological juxtaposition and syncretic incorporation of classical and Christian elements—subjects, motifs, and forms—in the art of the Italian Renaissance and the significant meaning of classical subjects and figures in such contexts. In this study, I analyze the interpretative modes applied to extra-Biblical and secular literature in the Italian Tre- and Quattrocento and the syncretic philosophies of the later Quattro- and early Cinquecento and reevaluate selected works of art from the Italian Renaissance in light of the period claims and beliefs that are evident from such a study. In summary, my dissertation considers the use of classical subjects, motifs, and forms in the art of the Italian Renaissance as a means to gloss or reveal aspects of Christian doctrine. In chapter 1, I respond to the paradigm proposed by Erwin Panofsky (*Renaissance and Renascences*) and establish a new criteria for understanding the difference between medieval and Renaissance perceptions of classical antiquity. Chapter 2 includes a study of the mythological scenes painted in the Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral, which are here shown to gloss and reveal aspects of the developing Christian doctrine of Purgatory. In chapter 3, I study the Renaissance use of representational ambiguity as a means of signifying the propriety of pursuing an allegorical interpretation of a work and specifically address the typological significance of figures in Botticelli's

*Primavera*. In chapter 4, I examine the philosophical concepts of *prisci theologii* and *theologicae poetae* and their significance in relation to the representation of classical figures in medieval and Renaissance works of art. This study provides the necessary background for a reevaluation of syncretic themes in Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura, which is the subject of the final chapter. In chapter 5, I identify classical figures in the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura—among them, Orpheus in the *Parnassus* and Plato and Aristotle in the *Disputa*—and offer a new interpretation of the iconographic program of the Stanza della Segnatura frescoes as a representation of the means by which participants in the Christian tradition, broadly conceived, approach God through the parallel paths of dialectic and moral philosophy.

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I have relied on a number of friends and colleagues, as experts to assist me in fields that are beyond my own area of specialty, as critical minds to help in resolving the

intricacies of ideas, representations, and beliefs, and, on more than one occasion, as audience for my pontification. I would name and thank, in particular, Travis Clark, Alejandra Gimenez-Berger, Rhea Higgins, Fran Altvater, Wendy Closterman, and Jane Evans, for all that they have done and contributed. Raphael Esterson and Rebecca Kline Esterson receive special thanks for their continued interest and for their help in understanding the doctrines, histories, and exegetical methods of both the Jewish and Christian traditions.

My research has been supported, even made possible by a number of departments and individuals from Temple University. I wish to thank the Tyler School of Art and Dean Kim Strommen of the Temple campus in Rome for providing funds to travel, study, and teach in Italy in the summer of 2004. I thank also Dean Achilles Iglesias and the Graduate School of Temple University for providing a Dissertation Completion Grant, which has made possible the timely completion of this study.

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Thank you, Caroline, for everything.

## DEDICATION

With the deepest appreciation for all that she has done, and with the recognition that none of this would have been possible without her support, her encouragement, and her belief in my ability to achieve that which seemed impossible and should rightly have been so, I dedicate this dissertation.

To Caroline.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is, or seems, perhaps, something more than coincidental that exactly fifty years have passed between the publication of Edgar Wind's influential study, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, and the completion of this dissertation, which derives its title, *Christian Mysteries in the Italian Renaissance*, from that other work.<sup>1</sup> The observant reader will note that the similarity between these two studies runs considerably deeper than their titles. This dissertation, like Wind's study, offers a system of allegorical interpretation by which certain classically-themed works of art from the Italian Renaissance may, in Wind's terminology, be "elucidated."<sup>2</sup> There are significant differences between the two studies, as well, which are the result not only of differences in scholarly opinion and method, but are also a reflection of developments in the study of Renaissance theology that have, in intervening years, transformed a number of scholarly disciplines. Edgar Wind, himself, was particularly attuned to the importance of theology for the study of Renaissance art.<sup>3</sup> In his consideration of classical subjects in Renaissance

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 21: "Although the chief aim of this book will be to elucidate a number of great Renaissance works of art, I shall not hesitate to pursue philosophical arguments in their own terms, and in whatever detail they may require." Inasmuch as this passage applies equally to this dissertation, it bears quotation in full.

<sup>2</sup> Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 21: "Although the chief aim of this book will be to elucidate a number of great Renaissance works of art, I shall not hesitate to pursue philosophical arguments in their own terms, and in whatever detail they may require." Inasmuch as this passage applies equally to this dissertation, it bears quotation in full.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Wind, *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling*, ed. Elizabeth Sears (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).



art, however, he turned primarily to philosophy, above all to the Neo-Platonism of the Quattrocento humanists, to explain the use of classical motifs by Christian artists and patrons. Wind took as his subject a set of interrelated motifs. His method was strictly iconographic, and his conclusions were, for the most part, well reasoned and insightful. There is, however, another class of objects, in addition to those studied by Wind, which include classical subjects and motifs within a greater program that is explicitly Christian or in juxtaposition with Christian motifs or forms. In such a context, and in specific instances, it is reasonable, even requisite to pursue a theological, rather than a purely philosophical significance for certain classical subjects and motifs in Renaissance art. This is the subject of the dissertation which follows. This dissertation does not seek to refute or revise Wind's findings, but to consider works of art which fell outside of his study and to pursue their meanings particularly in light of contemporary, i.e. Renaissance, modes of interpretation and modern studies of Renaissance theology.

The last fifty years have seen significant developments in the modern perception of Renaissance theology and its importance in relation to various aspects and products of Renaissance society, visual art included. Rather than recount, here, the contributions made by each scholar in turn, it will more than suffice to refer the interested reader to John O'Malley's introduction to a posthumous collection of Edgar Wind's studies on the religious symbolism of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling.<sup>4</sup> There, O'Malley, who has himself contributed significantly to the literature on Renaissance theology, describes the

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<sup>4</sup> John O'Malley, "The Religious and Theological Culture of Michelangelo's Rome, 1508-1512," in Edgar Wind, *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling*, ed. Elizabeth Sears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xli-lii.

developments of the past fifty years far more ably than could the author of this dissertation. The same interested reader would also do well to consider Timothy Verdon's introduction to a compilation of essays presented at a 1985 conference on Christianity and the Renaissance, and, indeed, the essays, themselves.<sup>5</sup> Verdon comments on the difference between the mid nineteenth-century view of Renaissance society, as represented and defined by Jacob Burckhardt, and the late twentieth-century perception of the same, which is decidedly more enlightened and informed with regard to the place of theology.<sup>6</sup> What O'Malley and Verdon have done well, elsewhere, it is not necessary to do again, here. This dissertation builds on the foundation these scholars have laid, and on the work of others like them, most notably including Ernst Curtius and Charles Trinkaus, whose respective studies of medieval literature and Renaissance philosophy are also histories of theology and treatises on the integration of theology into medieval and Renaissance societies.<sup>7</sup>

In methodology, this dissertation is largely iconographic, but employs also other methods of determining the meaning and significance of a subject or motif and of establishing the propriety of an plausible interpretation. Thus, this dissertation studies the development of literary interpretation in the late medieval and early Renaissance periods

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Verdon, "Christianity, The Renaissance, and the Study of History: Environments of Experience and Imagination," in Timothy Verdon and John Henderson, eds., *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 1-37.

<sup>6</sup> Verdon, "Christianity, The Renaissance, and the Study of History," 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Inc., 1953); Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (London: Constable & Co, 1970).

and pursues the manner in which each society regarded the allegorical content of extra-Biblical texts and, through this, the manner in which each of these society regarded the relationship between classical culture and their own. Elsewhere, this dissertation considers the means by which a Renaissance artist may have signaled the propriety of an allegorical interpretation, particularly through the use of representational ambiguity in works of art that defy easy categorization or interpretation as classical *or* Christian in subject. Furthermore, the concepts of change and development—manifest in changes in interpretative methods, changes in the perceptions of the relationships between classical and Christian cultures, the development of ideas and doctrines, the development of style, and the development of an iconographic program—are, are essential throughout this study. Though the established method of pairing a source text with a represented subject or motif is still employed in this study, so, also, are these other methods and concerns, which, strictly speaking, are not the concern of an iconographic method.

The interpretations allowed and supported by the methods employed in this study reveal its central thesis, that the Renaissance use of classical motifs differed from that of the medieval period, preceding it, primarily in that Renaissance authorities believed that Christian doctrine could be glossed and even revealed by the representation of subjects and motifs drawn from classical history and mythology. Thus, this dissertation seeks the typological, anagogical, and syncretic significance of classical subjects represented in Renaissance art. These are the subjects treated in the dissertation which follows.

## CHAPTER 1

MIEVEAL AND RENAISSANCE RESPONSES TO CLASSICAL  
ANTIQUITY: RETHINKING THE PARADIGM

It has been well established that authors, artists, and philosophers of the Italian Renaissance expressed in their creative output a deep and pervasive interest in the forms and subjects of classical Antiquity. It has also been established, however, that the authors, artists, and philosophers of the Italian Renaissance were not alone in such an interest. A significant body of literature describes the varied response of medieval authors, artists, and philosophers to the remains of classical culture. Scholars such as Fritz Saxl, Erwin Panofsky and Jean Seznec have charted and described the persistence of classical subjects and motifs in the art of the Middle Ages and expounded on the differences between these medieval manifestations of the pagan gods and their subsequent representation in the art of the Italian Quattro- and Cinquecento.

<sup>1</sup> Though these authors have contributed greatly to the study and understanding of the occurrence and representation of mythological subjects in medieval and Renaissance art, there are developments in the Italian Trecento, particularly regarding the interpretation of secular and mythological literature, that have yet gone unnoticed by art historians, though their effect on the visual art of the Renaissance period is profound. It is in the realm of interpretation that significant differences can be seen between medieval and Renaissance

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, "Classical Mythology in Medieval Art," *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 4:2 (March 1933), 228-80; Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960); Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).

responses to classical mythology—where medieval exegetes and commentators allowed a spiritual or an anagogical meaning only to the Judeo-Christian narrative represented in the canonical books of the Bible, Renaissance authors increasingly claimed a similar degree of spiritual significance for their own work and ultimately for other secular narratives, including those of ancient Greece and Rome. Thus, by the end of the Trecento, the application of exegetical modes to the interpretation of classical mythology allowed the perception of Christian content in the stories of the pagan pantheon, beyond allegorical moralizing, even to degree that these sources could be seen to contain an objectively Christian Truth. This development, in turn, contributed to the development of Renaissance syncretism and to the rise of mythologically themed works of art in subsequent centuries.

Panofsky wrote his *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*—or composed the 1952 Guggenheim Lectures that would become that book—to address the “Renaissance Problem,” a contemporary debate over the nature and even the existence of a distinct Italian Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of the debate was the question of what factors or characteristics, if any, distinguished the Italian Renaissance from the European Middle Ages. Other scholars and critics had rightly observed that the Middle Ages had included various “renaissances”—the so-termed Carolingian Renaissance and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance—or periods of profound and significant interest in the remains or the perception of classical Greece and Rome.<sup>3</sup> In his study, Panofsky acknowledged these

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<sup>2</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations*, xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Hubert, *The Carolingian Renaissance* (New York: G. Braziller, 1970); Charles Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

instances of interest in classical antiquity, but found, also, reasons to retain the division of periods and to distinguish the Italian Renaissance. Ultimately, Panofsky followed Giorgio Vasari's lead, four centuries earlier, in proposing a break from medieval precedent and dividing the subsequent Renaissance into three phases, roughly equivalent to the divisions of the thirteenth-, the fifteenth-, and the sixteenth-centuries. According to Panofsky's system, artists of the thirteenth-century, the first phase, sought new means of representing the visual world; artists of the fifteenth-century, the second phase, returned to forms known from the study of antique models; and artists of the sixteenth-century, the third phase, expressed in their art the full realization of advances that had been made in the previous centuries. Panofsky's own summary bears quotation in full:

Similarly, the art historian, no matter how many details he may find it necessary to revise in the picture sketched out by Filippo Villani and completed by Vasari, will have to accept the basic facts that a first radical break with the mediaeval principles of representing the visible world by means of line and color was made in Italy at the turn of the thirteenth century; that a second fundamental change, starting in architecture and sculpture rather than painting and involving an intense preoccupation with classical antiquity, set in at the beginning of the fifteenth; and that a third, climactic phase of the entire development, finally synchronizing the three arts and temporarily eliminating the dichotomy between the naturalistic and the classicistic points of view, began at the threshold of the sixteenth.<sup>4</sup>

Panofsky did attempt to distinguish the Renaissance "preoccupation with classical antiquity" from earlier medieval interest in classical culture. The essential differences, he claimed, derived from the manner in which the artists, authors, and authorities of each

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University Press, 1927). Also note Panofsky's discussion of the topic and bibliography, Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 1-8 and in particular 5 n. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 39.

period viewed Antiquity in relation to their own culture: that the Carolingians and even twelfth-century medievals thought of themselves as legitimate heirs to Antiquity and could not, therefore, reinvent what they felt had never fully been lost, while the greater chronological and conceptual distance between Ancient civilization and the Renaissance permitted Trecento poets, authors, artists, philosophers, and their descendants in subsequent centuries to lament the death of Ancient Rome and pine for its rebirth. Thus, where medievals sought only to renew Antiquity, Petrarch and his ilk called for its rebirth.<sup>5</sup> The distinction has significant ramifications. Panofsky claimed that it would have been anachronistic for artists in the twelfth-century to present a classical figure in classical garb, enacting a scene from classical mythology and placed within a classically inspired setting, precisely because the medieval mind did not view classical Antiquity as entirely separate from its own era and could only present classical elements together with medieval subject or form.<sup>6</sup> Thus Panofsky developed his “principle of disjunction”:

Whenever in the high and later Middle Ages a work of art borrows its form from a classical model, this form is almost invariably invested with a non-classical, normally Christian, significance; wherever in the high and later Middle Ages a work of art borrows its theme from classical poetry, legend, history or mythology, this theme is quite invariably presented in a non-classical, normally contemporary, form.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations*, 108-13.

<sup>6</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations*, 111-12.

<sup>7</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations*, 84.

Conversely, in Panofsky's view, because the artists of the Italian Renaissance viewed Antiquity as separate from their own period, they could reconstruct and admire a classical ideal, rather than a contemporary reality, and re-integrate classical forms with classical subject and setting.<sup>8</sup> This, for Panofsky, was the great achievement of the Italian Quattrocento.<sup>9</sup>

There is much to admire in Panofsky's study. There is also be sufficient room for refining or amending some of his theories. Panofsky was correct to observe, or at least to quote Libeschütz in his observation that the middle ages drew from Antiquity "such [ideas and forms] as seemed to fit in with the thought and actions of the immediate present."<sup>10</sup> Certain ecclesiastical authorities in the medieval period dictated precisely this approach toward the appropriation and interpretation of pagan knowledge and literary remains. Yet this very practice belies Panofsky's assertion that the Middle Ages did not fully distinguish their own era from that of classical Antiquity. In fact, late Antique and medieval theologians and exegetes were exceedingly careful to distinguish what aspects of classical culture could and should be appropriated by medieval Christianity and to distinguish the basis of their belief system from that of the pagan culture which had preceded them. This suggests, at least, that the ecclesiastical authorities of the medieval period saw their own history and culture as distinct from that of Antiquity and were able to select portions of their cultural heritage to adapt to their own use. Conversely,

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<sup>8</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 112-13.

<sup>9</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 111, citing Libeschütz.



ecclesiastical authorities, authors and perhaps even artists of the Italian Renaissance may have perceived significantly less distinction between their own culture and that of Antiquity than Panofsky asserted, and in certain respects less than their predecessors in the medieval period.

Beginning in the Trecento, Italian authors—Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Coluccio Salutati—enacted a change in the interpretation of secular text, such that certain contemporary and even classical works were perceived to contain elements of Christian wisdom in deeper levels of allegorical meaning. Where medieval theologians had allowed this “spiritual” or “anagogical sense” only to the Biblical narrative, Renaissance authors claimed the same degrees of allegory even for the narrative of classical mythology. Ultimately, Renaissance philosophers expanded Christianity beyond Judeo-Christian history, even to include the history and culture of classical Antiquity. Thus, the differences between the two periods—medieval and Renaissance—may be somewhat other than those proposed by Panofsky. Certain authorities of the medieval period did perceive a great difference between their Christian culture and the pagan culture of Ancient Greece and Rome, and thus selected only those portions that were harmonious with their own. The phenomenon that Panofsky described in his “principle of disjunction” may result from a perceived distance, rather than a perceived continuity. If the Italian Renaissance did produce works of art in which both form and subject are classically inspired—the great re-integration that is, for Panofsky, a hallmark of the Renaissance, proper—the interpretive methods of Renaissance authors, and later artists and theologians, suggest that even these works may have underlying Christian significance and express a Renaissance perception of the essential unity and continuity of

Antiquity and the Christian culture which follows. Panofsky rightly observed certain fundamental formal and iconographic distinctions between the art of the Middle Ages and that of the Italian Renaissance. However, the underlying principles or causes for these differences may not be as Panofsky had suggested, but may relate instead to changes in the interpretation of allegorical meaning in sacred and secular texts and corresponding changes in the perceived relationship of the classical and Christian cultures.

It is incorrect to speak in general terms of a medieval response to Antiquity. The broad expanse of European history that is collectively invoked by the term “medieval” was by no means uniform, and the peoples and institutions of its various periods, regions, or cultures responded to the physical, literary, and conceptual remains of classical Greece and Rome in a host of different ways. It is true, however, that theologians from the far ends of the chronological period dictated a certain response to classical philosophy, instructing that any elements of pagan thought or knowledge that were harmonious with the beliefs and systems of the Christian faith could be appropriated and put to proper, Christian use. It is this principle, rather than any lack of “perspective distance,” as Panofsky claims, which is reflected in a certain tendency, within the vast medieval period, to select classical ideas or forms and to marry them, respectively, with aspects of contemporary representation or significance.<sup>11</sup> The medieval theologians who crafted and refined this response toward classical philosophy were variously defensive, hostile, or suspicious of pagan culture, and allowed the appropriation of certain Truths, as they viewed them, not out of a sense of continuity with classical Antiquity, but, quite the

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<sup>11</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 111.

opposite, in order to reclaim and properly use what had been accidentally found and largely corrupted by a people who were distinct and different from themselves and their tradition.

Early in the third-century C.E., the Greek Apologist Origen advised Gregory Thaumaturgus, later Bishop of Caesarea, both on his career and on the proper use of philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Recommending that Gregory should focus his intelligence on Christianity, Origen nevertheless allowed that Gregory should take from the philosophy and sciences of the Greeks what was suitable for the pursuit of Christian understanding and the interpretation of Holy Scripture. Origen wrote:

And I would wish that you should take with you on the one hand those parts of the philosophy of the Greeks which are fit, as it were, to serve as general or preparatory studies for Christianity, and on the other hand so much of Geometry and Astronomy as may be helpful for the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. The children of the philosophers speak of geometry and music and grammar and rhetoric and astronomy as being ancillary to philosophy; and in the same way we might speak of philosophy itself as being ancillary to Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

Origen allowed the study of philosophy and certain worldly sciences, but also established a hierarchy of learning or scholarly pursuit. Philosophy was permitted as a learned pursuit, but only as an introduction or foundation for proper Christian learning.

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<sup>12</sup> Origen to Gregory Thaumaturgus, translated and reproduced in Allan Menzies, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Original Supplement to the American Edition*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), 295-96.

<sup>13</sup> Origen to Gregory Thaumaturgus, in Menzies, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 295.

In the same letter to Gregory Thaumaturgus, Origen illustrated his views on the proper application of pagan knowledge with examples drawn from the Biblical narrative. Origen explained that the appropriation of Truth from pagan knowledge and its use for Christianity was signified by God's direction to the children of Israel to take Egyptian gold, silver, and raiments before leaving that land and to make from those spoils the Tabernacle and its furnishings.<sup>14</sup> The Egyptians, he stated, had not made proper use of their goods, but the Hebrews, because the wisdom of God was with them, put them to religious purposes.<sup>15</sup> Origen implied, though he did not explicitly state, that classical scholars and philosophers had not fully realize or appreciate those elements of their own work that were True, but that these elements could, nonetheless, be properly appropriated, even reclaimed, and applied to the development of Christian ritual or scholarship. Origen was careful to warn against the dangers of pagan knowledge, however, and cautioned Gregory with the example of Ader, the Edomite, who fled Solomon and later, after spending too much time in Egypt and assimilating to its culture, tempted the Israelites with a false god:

Holy Scripture knows, however, that it was an evil thing to descend from the land of the children of Israel into Egypt; and in this a great truth is wrapped up. For some it is of evil that they should dwell with the Egyptians, that is to say, with the learning of the world, after they have been enrolled in the law of God and in the Israelite worship of Him.... I have learned by experience and can tell you that there are few who have taken of the useful things of Egypt and come out of it, and have then prepared what is required for the service of God; but Ader the Edomite on the other hand has many a brother. I mean those who, founding on some

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<sup>14</sup> Exodus 11:2-3, 12:35-36.

<sup>15</sup> Origen to Gregory Thaumaturgus, in Menzies, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 295.

piece of Greek learning, have brought forth heretical ideas, and have as it were made golden calves in Bethel, which is, being interpreted, the house of God.<sup>16</sup>

Implicit in this example are Origen's warning and the details of his instruction: the study of pagan philosophy or worldly knowledge may provide a suitable precursor to religious studies, but these pursuits are not innocuous, and prolonged study by the Christian initiate may tempt him into heresy.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine described his own progress from professor of rhetoric and student of philosophy to Christian convert, enacting the very steps that Origen had allowed in the letter to Gregory.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising, given this background, to find Origen's principles repeated in Augustine's treatise *On Christian Doctrine*. Like Origen, Augustine allowed that the arts and sciences of pagan knowledge—from astrology and mechanics to logic, rhetoric, mathematics, et cetera—may be pursued, not for their own ends, but as precursors to the study of Scripture and Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Augustine also called for the selective appropriation of suitable elements from pagan philosophy and illustrated the principle with the example of Egyptian spoils:

Furthermore, if those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said things by chance that are truthful and conformable to our faith, we must not only have no fear of them, but even appropriate them for our own use from those who are, in a sense, their illegal

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<sup>16</sup> Origen to Gregory Thaumaturgus, in Menzies, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 295-96.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine *Confessions* 5:12-14, 6:2-4. On the proper progression from philosophical study to scriptural study, 7:20.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 2:28-39.

possessors. The Egyptians not only had idols and crushing burdens which the people of Israel detested and from which they fled, but they also had vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and clothing, which the Israelites leaving Egypt secretly claimed for themselves as if for a better use. Not on their own authority did they make this appropriation, but by the command of God, while the Egyptians themselves, without realizing it, were supplying the things which they were not using properly. In the same way, all the teachings of the pagans have counterfeit and superstitious notions and oppressive burdens of useless labor, which anyone of us, leaving the association of pagans with Christ as our leader, ought to abominate and shun. However, they also contain liberal instruction more adapted to the service of truth and also very useful principles about morals; even some truths about the service of the one God Himself are discovered among them. These are, in a sense, their gold and silver. They themselves did not create them, but excavated them, as it were, from some mines of divine Providence which is everywhere present, but they wickedly and unjustly misuse this treasure for the service of demons. When the Christian severs himself in spirit from the wretched association of these men, he ought to take these from them for the lawful service of preaching the Gospel. It is also right for us to receive and possess, in order to convert it to a Christian use, their clothing, that is, those human institutions suited to intercourse with men which we cannot do without in this life.<sup>19</sup>

If this passage is lengthy, its significance and subtleties merit its quotation in full.

Augustine elaborated on Origen's interpretation, specifying that only certain elements are to be drawn from philosophy, as only certain spoils were taken from Egypt, while others must be abhorred and shunned. Augustine made clear that Truths—precepts that are harmonious or even identical to Christian doctrine—are to be found in philosophy, and apparently with more abundance among the Platonists, but that these do not rightfully belong to philosophy and are perverted by philosophers toward unholy worship.

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 2:40. Aurelius Augustinus, *Writings of Saint Augustine*, trans. John J. Gavigan, O.S.A. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 4:112-13.

Though both Origen and Augustine wrote at the onset of the Christian Middle Ages, even in the waning years of the classical era, the principle that they established with regard to the selective appropriation of pagan philosophy was repeated and enacted even in the late medieval period.<sup>20</sup> The application of this principle was vividly illustrated in the resolution of a conflict over the propriety of teaching Aristotle at the University of Paris in the early decades of the thirteenth-century. Believing that Aristotelian works were at the root of various heretical movements among students and professors at the University, the Provincial Council of Paris condemned the reading of Aristotle's *Natural History* in 1209. Six years later, a second council, initiated at the request of Pope Innocent III, found that Aristotle was still read in Paris, and forbade also his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, though other works were permitted for study, including the *Dialectics* and *Ethics*. It was not Innocent III, however, but Gregory IX, in the 1220s and 1230s, who settled the matter, first by repeating the condemnation of those books which infect and corrupt the word of God, but ultimately by calling for a commission to examine, translate, and correct Aristotle's text and to remove any elements harmful to Christianity.<sup>21</sup> In language somewhat more eloquent than Augustine's, the pope's letter appointing the commission essentially repeated the Church Father's injunction to claim

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<sup>20</sup> More specifically, Augustine's prescription on the proper use of pagan philosophy has continued relevance, even if Origen and his writings began a sharp fall from favor by the end of the fourth-century C.E. See also *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Origen and Origenism." See also Jerome to Pammachius and Oceanus, 400 C.E., in which he distances himself from Origen's teachings, also Theophilus to Jerome, 400 C.E., on the attack against fanatics and the heresy of Origen, among others.

<sup>21</sup> Brother Azarias, *Aristotle and the Christian Church* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench & Co., 1888), 34-37.

what is true and harmonious with Christianity and the view shared by Augustine and Origen that pagan knowledge must support Christian doctrine. Gregory even employed the well-worn metaphor of Egyptian spoils taken by the Hebrews:

As other sciences ought to minister to the wisdom of Holy Writ, the Faithful should embrace them according as they perceive them giving willing service to the sovereign master; so that should aught of poison or other vicious thing be found in them calculated to diminish the purity of the Faith, the same should be cast far away... Thus, that the Hebrews might grow rich with the spoils of the Egyptians, they were commanded to borrow their precious vases of gold and silver, leaving aside those of brass, copper, or wood. Having learned, then, that certain books of natural philosophy, which were prohibited by the Provincial Council of Paris, are said to contain things useful and baneful, and lest the baneful should mar the useful, We strongly enjoin upon your discretion... to examine those books with as minute care and prudence as behooves, and to remove whatever is erroneous, or of scandal, or in the least offensive to the readers, so that after the severe pruning of all suspected passages, what remains, may, without delay and without danger, be restored to study.<sup>22</sup>

Augustine's charge to claim from philosophy what is harmonious with Christian faith was also depicted in word and image in a series of frescoes and manuscript illuminations from the Italian Trecento. If these works of art are now widely scattered and in varying states of preservation, they share essentials of subject and representation and appear to derive, through various paths of redaction, from a common prototype, no longer extant.<sup>23</sup> The family of works includes two fresco cycles, painted for the church

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<sup>22</sup> Gregory IX to William of Beauvais, Simon of Authie, and Stephen of Provins, April 23, 1231 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Suppl. lat. num., 1575). Transcribed and translated in Brother Azarias, *Aristotle and the Christian Church*, appendix.

<sup>23</sup> On the family of related works and their possible redactions, see Sergio Bettini, *Giusto de' Menabuoi e l'Arte del Trecento* (Padova: Società per Azioni, 1944), 112-21.



of the Eremitani, Padua, and for Sant'Andrea, Ferrara. The Padua cycle, though originally more extensive than the Ferrara frescoes, exists today only in small fragments.<sup>24</sup> Its appearance can be partially reconstructed from a fifteenth-century description of its composition and inscriptions and through comparison with other, related works.<sup>25</sup> The remnant of the Ferrara cycle, one wall from a chapel dedicated to Saint Augustine, survived the destruction of the church and is preserved in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Ferrara. (Figure 1) The same compositional and figurative elements are variously included in a number of manuscript illuminations, of which the decoration on folio 3r of a codex now in Madrid (Biblioteca Nacional, Ms. N. 197) most closely corresponds to the Padua and Ferrara frescoes.<sup>26</sup> (Figure 2)

In the Madrid manuscript, Augustine sits enthroned at the top and center of the composition, flanked by Theology and Philosophy, personified as female figures, to his

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<sup>24</sup> On the church of the Eremitani and its decoration, see Paolo Carpeggiani, "Gli Eremitani," in Neri Pozza, editor, *Padova: Basiliche e Chiese* (Vicenza: Officine Grafiche Sta, 1975), 217-34. The remaining fragments of the relevant cycle were published by Bettini, *Giusto de' Menabuoi*, figs. 33-37.

<sup>25</sup> In particular, Hartmann Schedel's description gave the fullest understanding of composition and inscriptions. The relevant portion of Schedel's *Memorabilienbuch* (München, Hof- und Staatsbibliothek, Cod. lat. 418, fol. 104-109) were reproduced in Julius von Schlosser, "Giusto's Fresken in Padua und die Vorläufer der Stanza della Segnatura," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 17 (1896), 91-94.

<sup>26</sup> Paolo d'Ancona, "Nicolò da Bologna miniaturista del secolo XIV," *Arte Lombarda: Rivista di Storia dell'Arte* 14 (1969), fig. 16; Dieter Blume and Dorothee Hainsen, "Agostino Pater e Praeceptor di un Nuovo Ordine Religioso (Considerazioni sulla Propaganda Illustrata degli Eremiti Agostiniani)," in *Arte e Spiritualità negli Ordini Mendicanti: Gli Agostiniani e il Cappellone di San Nicola a Tolentino* (Rome: Argos, 1992), fig. 8; Luigi Coletti, "Un Affresco Due Miniature e Tre Problemi," *L'Arte*, n.s., 4 (1934), fig.1.

proper right and left, respectively. Theology looks upward, toward a miniature manifestation of God, and stands over a wheel-within-a-wheel that bears the four heads of creatures seen by Ezekiel and is inscribed: *testa[mentum] vet[us], testa[mentum] nov[u]m, sensus allegoricus, and sensus literalis*. An open codex within the wheel is inscribed with a passage derived from Ezekiel 1:16: *Apparuit rota una super terram habens quatuor facies et opera quasi roti in dimidio rote* / “There appeared a wheel over the earth having four faces and its work was as it were a wheel in the midst of a wheel.”

Philosophy looks downward and stands over the consecutive circles of the planets and the Zodiac. Behind each personification are seated four representatives: four authors each of Scriptural and philosophical text. Each figure is named in inscriptions either above or below: St. Jerome, St. John the Evangelist, St. Paul, and Moses on the side of Theology, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and Seneca behind Philosophy. The poses and gestures of these figures mirror those of their personified disciplines: the four authors of Scripture look upward to God, as if to view and receive revelation; the four philosophers look down to the earth and planets and hold their chins in their hands, fold their hands, or gesture in learned discourse. Passages from Augustine’s writings appear on scrolls above both the theologians and the philosophers and define the Church Father’s opinion on the relative merits of the two disciplines. The scroll over the theologians paraphrases a letter to Jerome, in which Augustine praised the purity of Scripture:

*Scriptura[s] ca[n]onicas solas ita sequor ut sc[ri]ptores ea[rum] ni[chil] i[n] eis o[mn]i[n]o erasse v[e]l fal[la]cit[er] posuisse n[on] dubitem.*

For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.

In stark contrast, the passage over the philosophers is none other than Augustine's injunction, from *On Christian Doctrine*, to appropriate those portions of pagan philosophy that are harmonious with Christian faith:

*Phylosophy, si q[ua] v[er]a dix[er]u[n]t et fi[dei] n[ost]re accommodea, s[un]t ab eis ta[n]q[uam] ab iniusti[s] poss[ess]or[i]b[us] i[n] usu[m] no[strum] vindicanda.*

Philosophy, if it has said what is true and in harmony with our faith, is to be claimed for our own use from those who possess it unlawfully.

The figures on the lower register of the Madrid manuscript also illustrate the division of sacred and secular and, through their positions in the composition of the greater scene, correspond to Augustine's views on the proper pursuit of those activities that belong to each, respectively. Nicolò di Bologna, the illuminator, managed to fit fourteen female figures side by side, each with her own attributes and detailed inscriptions describing certain characteristics. The seven figures to the right, below philosophy and her representatives, are named as the seven Liberal Arts, arranged in the order of instruction and increasing complexity: Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astrology. Below each Art is a representative figure, an exemplar of the Art drawn from either Classical or Biblical history. The seven women to the left are the sacred counterparts to these secular pursuits—the Virtues, personified: Justice, Fortitude, Temperance, Prudence, Charity, Hope, and Faith. Below these Virtues are seven bowed and broken figures who represent not the application or institution of each virtue, but their antitheses: seven heretics and fallen kings who lacked in precisely those

qualities that are represented above them. If the Madrid manuscript places these figures, the Virtues and the Arts, side by side on a single register, they still take their positions in the composition in relation to the division of sacred and secular that is established by the figures above. The Arts sit below the Philosophers, to Augustine's left—the sinister side—as if to imply what is explicit in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, that these branches of worldly knowledge may be explored by the Christian, but should only be precursors to the study of sacred Scripture. The Virtues, however, sit at Augustine's right hand, beneath the authors of Scripture. The same composition was exhibited in the Padua fresco, with, perhaps, the same connotations.<sup>27</sup> In the Ferrara fresco, the Virtues and Arts each filled their own register and a hierarchical distinction gave the upper level to the holy figures. The lower register, with the personified Arts, has been severely damaged, and only fragments of those figures remain. The Virtues and Arts appear similarly composed, on registers, in another manuscript illuminated by Nicolò di Bologna, now found in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan (Ms. B. 42 Inf.).<sup>28</sup> (Figure 3)

The works of art that comprise this family of images are of interest not only as illustrations of a late medieval attitude toward pagan philosophy, but also for the details of the comparison that is made between secular text and sacred Scripture. Both of the frescoes and the Madrid illumination juxtapose pagan authors with the authors of the canonical books of the Bible and, in the inscription drawn from Augustine's letter to Jerome, implicitly castigate the secular authors while praising their sacred counterparts.

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<sup>27</sup> See Micchieli and Schedel, quoted in von Schlosser, "Giustos Fresken in Padua," 90-94.

<sup>28</sup> Coletti, "Un Affresco Due Miniature e Tre Problemi," fig. 3.

The passage states that *only* the authors of Scripture are without error. The precise nature of Scripture—the canonical Judeo-Christian Biblical narrative—is further glossed in the figure of a wheel-within-a-wheel that accompanies Theology and her representatives and is matched by the spheres of the planets and the Zodiac on the side of Philosophy. The inscriptions on the wheel suggest that it is a figure for Scripture and the methods of exegetical interpretation. The inscriptions on the wheel in the Madrid manuscript refer to the Old and New Testaments and to literal and allegorical senses. The same wheel appears also in a manuscript of Bartolomeo di Bartoli's *Canzone delle Virtù e delle Scienze* (Chantilly, Museo Condé, Cd. XX 6426, B), which manuscript includes also the full cycle of theologians, philosophers, Virtues and Liberal Arts.<sup>29</sup> (Figure 4) Here, the four heads that surround the wheel are labeled as the Evangelists—Matthew, Luke, Mark, and John—and the two wheels, outer and inner, are designated by inscriptions as the Old Testament (*testamentum vetus*) and New Testament (*testamentum novum*), respectively. The space circumscribed by the wheels is divided by six radii, and inscriptions in each section further distinguish the senses of scripture: the literal sense (*sensus litteralis*), the moral sense (*sensus moralis*), the natural sense (*sensus naturalis*), the anagogical sense (*sensus anagogicus*), the historical sense (*sensus ystor[i]ografus*), and the allegorical sense (*sensus allegoricus*).<sup>30</sup> These various degrees of literal and allegorical interpretation appear only on the side of Theology, only on the motif that designates

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<sup>29</sup> In particular, Leone Dorez, *La Canzone delle Virtù e delle Scienze di Bartolomeo di Bartoli da Bologna* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche Editore, 1904).

<sup>30</sup> Dorez, *La Canzone delle Virtù*, 25

Scripture. Indeed, the full range of these senses, including the anagogical sense, would be allowed only to the Biblical narrative throughout the medieval period, from the earliest centuries of Christianity through the High Middle Ages, and this distinction would separate that era from the Renaissance which followed.

In his *Contra Celsus*, Origen defended the Judeo-Christian narrative from the attacks of his pagan counterpart, arguing, against Celsus' claims to the contrary, that the Bible text did indeed contain allegorical meaning. Moreover, while Origen allowed or acknowledged that pagan mythology could also contain useful or wholesome moral instruction hidden within its fables of gods and goddesses, Origen praised the Bible for the purity and veracity of its literal sense and chastised the shameful and absurd stories of the Greeks, which offended and corrupted through their literal meaning.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, in his *De Principiis*, Origen described the particular nature of the Biblical narrative, its three senses, and what he termed its "historical," its "corporeal," and its "spiritual" interpretation. Origen asserted that the Bible was divinely inspired, not only in those portions which were prophetic, but also in its histories.<sup>32</sup> Further, Origen maintained that the Bible's text was composed with multiple levels of meaning, which he compared to the body, soul, and spirit of man. In Origen's system of exegesis, the "bodily" or "corporeal" sense was understood to recount the narrative of Creation and the histories of both the just and the wicked, and to serve for the edification and improvement of the greater multitude, who, in Origen's words, were unable to endure the fatigue of

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<sup>31</sup> Origen *Contra Celsus* 4:47-48.

<sup>32</sup> On the divine inspiration of Scripture, see Origen *De Principiis* 4:1:6. On the inner meaning of histories, as well as prophecies, see 4:1:13-14.

investigating more important matters. This “bodily” sense covered over a sense relating to the soul, which revealed the mysteries of the Christian faith—the nature and manner of God and his Son, of angels, demons, souls, and the world.<sup>33</sup> A third sense, that of the spirit, was understood to be the allegorical meaning of the Biblical narrative that was contained in the patterns of the Old and New Testaments, that is, in the Christian meaning of passages from Jewish text or history that were thought to contain a shadow of future blessings. Thus “spiritual” interpretation brought to light the Christian mysteries that were, according to Origen, hidden within the “corporeal” laws and histories of the Jews.<sup>34</sup>

An important distinction inherent in Origen’s system was made more explicit later in the Middle Ages, in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*. Origen was careful to specify that the Jewish laws and histories recorded in the Old Testament contained Christian significance in their “spiritual” sense—i.e. Christian mysteries were to be found within the whole of the Jewish narrative, historical as well as prophetic.<sup>35</sup> In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas claimed that God had not only composed the Biblical narrative in such a manner that it was “true”—that the narrative of the Old and New Testaments contained Christian Truth in moral, typological, and anagogical senses—but also that the Divine author had so shaped historical events that history, itself, as well as the Biblical text which recorded it, was crafted in relation to Christian mysteries. This very quality

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<sup>33</sup> Origen *De Principiis* 4:1:14.

<sup>34</sup> Origen *De Principiis* 4:1:12.

<sup>35</sup> Origen *De Principiis* 4:1:13-14.

distinguished the allegories of the Biblical narrative from those of other, secular works.

Wrote Aquinas:

The author of sacred scripture is God, who has the power not only to use words in order to signify (which even humans can do) but also to use things themselves in order to signify. Thus although words are used to signify in every science, it is proper to this science that the things signified by the words themselves signify something.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, according to Aquinas, not only the Judeo-Christian narrative, but Judeo-Christian history, as well, was crafted so as to have Christian relevance, i.e. to contain within events and their description the Truths of Christian theology. In contrast, other sciences were understood to signify only by words, not by things themselves. Pagan poetry, pagan mythology, pagan history could not compare to the interwoven Judeo-Christian narrative, theology, and history that was the Bible text. Because secular or pagan narratives were neither authored by God nor invested with mystical truths that were inherent in things themselves, the allegorical systems within secular poetry and pagan myth could not include typological or anagogical senses, and thus did not reveal the mysteries of the faith. Thus, in the perception of medieval theologians such as Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas, a gulf existed between the allegory of the poets and the allegory of the theologians, and signaled, perhaps, that these theologians and their contemporaries perceived a similar gulf between the history and culture of Antiquity and that of the Judeo-Christian tradition. If certain medieval institutions, practices, or concepts grew

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<sup>36</sup> Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1:10c. Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on the Divine Nature: Summa Theologiae I 1-13*, trans. Brian Shanley, O.P. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 16.



from those of Antiquity, here, in the perceived significance of sacred history, medieval theologians distanced themselves from any culture, literature, or history that was not part of the Biblical narrative.

The representation of classical subjects in the art and literature of the Middle Ages corresponds to the systems of meaning or interpretation implicitly allowed to secular text by medieval theologians. In a 1940 publication, Jean Seznec studied the mythological tradition in the Middle Ages and Renaissance and observed that medieval representations of classical subjects tended to present the pagan gods or goddesses as historical figures (actual heroes, kings, and queens who were mistaken for deities and elevated to the pagan pantheon), as physical entities (planets or celestial bodies that were similarly mistaken for deities), or as signs with allegorical significance relating to proper codes of behavior.<sup>37</sup> Thus, to paraphrase Seznec's work in the language of this study, Seznec observed that in medieval art and literature, classical subjects could be presented or interpreted for historical or physical significance or for moral meaning, on a literal or allegorical level. Until the later Middle Ages, the allegorical interpretation of classical subjects was restricted to moral significance. Seznec did sketch the development of a sort of Christian exegesis applied to classical myth, but this development occurred primarily from the fourteenth-century on.<sup>38</sup> Earlier representations and interpretations seem to have been more closely related to the principles outlined in Origen's discussion of

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<sup>37</sup> See Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*. Seznec called these the Historical Tradition, the Physical Tradition, and the Moral Tradition, respectively, and treated of each in chapters 1, 2, and 3, also respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 89-109.

classical mythology—though they need not have followed Origen directly—in allowing or acknowledging a degree of moral allegory and edifying instruction in the allegorical sense of pagan myth, even if the letter was seen as fallacious or corrupting. Throughout the greater expanse of the medieval era, medieval artists, poets, and theologians did not seek after any typological or anagogical allegory in pagan mythology. Thus, as example, Medieval art did not depict mythological subjects in typological relationship with Christian figures or events. Such a representation would have run counter to the perceived divisions of secular and sacred allegory and the possible interpretations of secular versus sacred text or history. This impossibility makes apparent the perceived division between the Judeo-Christian tradition, on the one hand, and the culture of Greco-Roman Antiquity, on the other.

It is possible, even necessary, in light of the views of medieval theologians outlined above, to refute or refine Panofsky's theories on the causes of principle of disjunction. As Panofsky observes, medieval works of art that have formal elements borrowed from classical models tend to have Christian significance, and medieval works that have subjects taken from classical sources tend to clothe them in contemporary form. This very phenomenon may have occurred as a result of the perceived distance between medieval culture and that of Antiquity and in accordance with the practice of selectively appropriating classical elements that were perceived as harmonious with the Christian faith. Indeed, to represent classical subjects in classical form would have been entirely antithetical to the culture of the Middle Ages, not because there existed any perceived continuity of cultures, which in theory could have made such a representation possible, but because medieval authorities recognized the gulf between the classical and Christian

cultures and prescribed the appropriation of elements from that Other culture only when they could be used for proper Christian purposes. A work of art with both classical form and subject could not have been produced by medieval artists; such a work would have belong to a different culture entirely.

In contrast to the views of medieval ecclesiasts, however, authors of the Italian Trecento increasingly claimed for their own writing and for other secular works the allegorical modes that had previously been recognized as belonging only to the Biblical narrative. Twice in his oeuvre Dante discussed the levels of meaning, or the senses that he believed were inherent in his own work. In his *Convivio*, a work dating to the first decade of the fourteenth-century, he offered to expound on the meaning of certain *canzoni*—songs—that he had previously published under the title *Vita Nuova*.<sup>39</sup> Though Dante specified that writings may be interpreted on four distinct levels—the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical—he claimed only literal and allegorical meaning for his work, and even distinguished the allegorical sense that is employed by secular poets from that of the theologians. Thus, Dante wrote:

As I noted in the opening chapter, this commentary must be literal and allegorical. To indicate what this means, it should be explained that texts can be interpreted, and must therefore be elucidated, principally in four senses. The first is called literal: this is the sense conveyed simply by the overt meaning of the words of a fictitious story, as, for example, in the case of fables told by poets. The second is called allegorical: this is the sense concealed under the cloak of these fables, and consists of a truth hidden under a beautiful lie.... I recognize that theologians understand this allegorical sense in a different way from the poets; but since my intention

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<sup>39</sup> Dante *Convivio* 1:1. See Dante, *The Banquet*, trans. Christopher Ryan (Saratoga, CA: ANMA Libri & Co, 1989), 15.

here is to follow the practice of the poets, I shall understand the allegorical sense as they do.<sup>40</sup>

Dante's description of the moral and anagogical senses is somewhat ambiguous: though he seems to have been describing his own, secular work, he includes a description of both the moral and the anagogical sense of allegory. His wording is vague, but inasmuch as his examples were drawn from the Bible, he may have here implied that these allegorical senses were found primarily, if not exclusively, in the Judeo-Christian narrative:

The third sense is called moral: this is the sense that teachers must be on the alert to notice as they work through texts, for their own benefit and that of their students. One can, for instance, notice in the Gospel that when Christ went up the mountain to be transfigured he took with him the three selected from the twelve apostles; the moral lesson which can be drawn from this is that we should have few companions in matters that touch us most closely.

The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is, transcending the senses: this is brought out when a work is expounded with regard to its spiritual meaning; even though the work is true in a literal sense, what is said there speaks also of things beyond our knowledge relating to eternal glory. One can see this, for instance, in that song of the prophet which says that, when the people of Israel escaped from Egypt, Judah was made holy and free. For although what is said here is clearly true in a literal sense, the spiritual meaning of these words is no less true, namely, that when the soul escapes from sin it is made holy and free in its distinctive power.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, there is relatively little that is new in Dante's discussion of meaning and interpretation as given in the *Convivio*, excepting his division of the allegorical sense into the distinct categories of that which is used by the poets and that which belongs to the theologians. Even here his discussion was strictly orthodox. The levels or degrees of

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<sup>40</sup> Dante *Convivio* 2:1, as in Dante, *The Banquet*, 42-43.

<sup>41</sup> Dante *Convivio*, as in Dante, *The Banquet*, p. 43.

meaning that were allowed to secular poetry and its interpreters were fewer and more mundane than those allowed to the Biblical narrative and its exegetes.

Elsewhere, however, Dante appears to have claimed even the moral and anagogical senses for his great masterwork, the *Divina Commedia*. In a letter to Can Grande, Vicar General of Verona and Vicenza, Dante wrote, with regard to the *Commedia*:

For the clearness, therefore, of what I shall say, it must be understood that the meaning of this work is not simple, but rather can be said to be of many significations, that is, of several meanings; for there is one meaning that is derived from the letter, and another that is derived from the things indicated by the letter. The first is called literal, but the second allegorical or mystical. That this method of expounding may be more clearly set forth, we can consider it in these lines: “When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion.” For if we consider the letter alone, the departure of the children of Israel is signified; if the allegory, our redemption accomplished in Christ is signified; if the moral meaning, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the departure of the sanctified soul from the slavery of this corruption to everlasting glory is signified. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they can in general all be said to be allegorical, since they differ from the literal or historic.<sup>42</sup>

Though there was some ambiguity inherent in his description of allegory in the *Convivio*, in that work Dante had been careful to distinguish between the allegory of the poets and that of the theologians and to take for himself only the levels of meaning allowed to the former. Here, in the letter to Can Grande, Dante attempted the exact opposite. He blurred the distinction between secular and sacred allegory, collapsing the moral and anagogical

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<sup>42</sup> Dante to Can Grande, paragraph 7, as in Charles Allen Dinsmore, *Aids to the Study of Dante* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1903), 267.

senses into the allegorical level of meaning, and illustrated each sense with examples taken from the Biblical narrative, though the work that he refers to as having these many senses was not the Bible, but his own *Commedia*.<sup>43</sup>

Dante's discussions of the allegorical sense were somewhat cryptic and perhaps not entirely out of order—while it was not Holy Writ, his *Divina Commedia* was a theological narrative of sorts and could even have been perceived as something of an historical account. Rather more extreme were the claims made later in the Trecento by Boccaccio. Boccaccio realized the possibilities that were hinted at in Dante's work and made an explicit claim for anagogical meaning in the most secular of sources, the mythological narrative of classical Antiquity. In the *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*, written between 1350 and 1374, Boccaccio described the literal and allegorical levels of meaning, as Dante had done in the *Convivio* and the letter to Can Grande. Boccaccio's description differed, however, in that he illustrated the interpretation of the literal and allegorical senses with an example from pagan mythology, as befitting the subject of his work. The greatest difference then followed, as Boccaccio described the anagogical meaning of the same pagan myth and demonstrated his method of interpreting the Christian significance of pagan text. In book 1, chapter 3 of the *Genealogie*, Boccaccio wrote:

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<sup>43</sup> On Dante's use of allegory and the significance of the *Convivio* and the letter to Can Grande, see Richard Hamilton Green, "Dante's "Allegory of Poets" and the Mediaeval Theory of Poetic Fiction," *Comparative Literature* 9:2 (spring 1957), 118-28; Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., review of *The Typological Problem in Dante: A study in the History of Medieval Ideas*, by Johan Chydenius, *Speculum* 35:3 (July 1960), 438-40.

The first meaning is the superficial, which is called literal. The others are deeper and are called allegorical. To make the matter easier, I will give an example. According to the poetic fiction, Perseus, son of Jupiter, killed the Gorgon, and flew away victorious into the air. Now, this may be understood superficially in a wise man's triumph over vice and his attainment of virtue. Allegorically it figures the pious man who scorns worldly delight and lifts his mind to heavenly things. It admits also an analogical sense, since it symbolizes Christ's victory over the Prince of this World, and his Ascension.<sup>44</sup>

In explicitly claiming the analogical sense for secular, even pagan, text, Boccaccio signaled not only a certain difference from Dante's system of interpretation, but a revolutionary departure from medieval interpretative methods and the perceived distinctions between sacred and secular text, even the perceived distinctions between Christian and classical culture that marked the medieval response to Antiquity. Not only did Boccaccio seek the mysteries of Christianity in the myths of classical Greece and Rome, but, in the same work, he claimed that the ancient poets were, in fact, theologians. Ironically, his justification for this assertion would appear to depend on the very same argument that supported the medieval practice of selective appropriation. Boccaccio noted that Ancient poets, at times, related Truths that were harmonious with Christian belief, and gave this as evidence for their status as sacred theologians. In book 15, chapter 8, of the *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*, Boccaccio argued his case:

On the other hand there are times, as in this book, when the theology of the Ancients will be seen to exhibit what is right and honorable, though in most cases it should be considered rather physiology or ethology than theology, according as the myths embody the truth concerning physical nature or human. But the old theology can sometimes be employed in the

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<sup>44</sup> Boccaccio *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium* 1:3. Translation in Charles Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1930), xviii.

service of Catholic truth, if the fashioner of the myths should choose. I have observed this in the case of more than one orthodox poet in whose investiture of fiction the sacred teachings were clothed. Nor let my pious critics be offended to hear the poets sometimes called even sacred theologians.<sup>45</sup>

Thus Boccaccio foiled Dante's distinctions of poetic and theological allegory, and thus he countered the greater medieval system of exegesis, which privileged the Biblical narrative over secular text precisely for its ability to convey, in the deeper senses of meaning, the mysteries of Christianity.

Similarly, Coluccio Salutati, who wrote only shortly after Boccaccio, sought Christian meaning in the myths of pagan Antiquity. In his *De Laboribus Herculis*—written primarily in the 1380s and 1390s, but left unfinished at the author's death in 1406—Salutati maintained that, though there were distinctions between sacred and secular poetry, God used both to relate the mysteries of the Christian faith. In the case of the Biblical narrative, this was achieved through the Divine author. Salutati proposed, however, that God, as the author of all things, worked even through secular poets who were, perhaps, unaware of his intrusions into their work. Thus secular, and even pagan poetry could contain, within, divinely inspired Truth relating to God, Heaven, salvation, and other mysteries properly known only to Christianity. Wrote Salutati:

The former type of poetry in Scripture, since it has as its author the Holy Spirit, is ordained to an infinity of meanings, nor is a truth congruent to the letter able to be conceived which was not from the beginning intended by the infinite spirit from whose throne that truth proceeds. The latter sort of poetry [secular poetry], however, insofar as it is a human invention, is

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<sup>45</sup> Boccaccio *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium* 15:8. Translation in Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, 120-21.



so ordered to the meaning of the author that sometimes it is related by God, the author of all things, to something other than what man thinks and sometimes it means only what the man wished to express.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, for Salutati, as for Boccaccio, it was possible to interpret pagan mythology in exactly the same manner as the Biblical narrative, with respect to its typological or anagogical meanings, and to find, hidden beneath the fallacious literal sense, truth that was not simply historical or moral, but relating to the mysteries of the Christian faith.

Herein, also, lies the significance with respect to the perceived distances between medieval culture and Antiquity, on the one hand, and between the Italian Renaissance and Antiquity, on the other. Where medieval exegetes, among them the foremost ecclesiastical authorities, viewed classical philosophy and literature as distinct and separate from the sacred Judeo-Christian tradition, Renaissance poets, and later philosophers and even ecclesiastical authorities would increasingly incorporate the classical tradition into the greater sweep of Christian history. Though, admittedly, certain medieval institutions and authorities evoked the idea of Rome and even took on certain forms that were derived from Ancient models, these same institutions and authorities maintained a distance from that Other culture, which was only made acceptable by Christianizing any elements that were borrowed. Conversely, because the Renaissance essentially Christianized the entire classical tradition by bringing the histories, literature, and forms of Greece and Rome into the Christian tradition, investing them with Christian significance, the two traditions were increasingly perceived as one, and poets, patrons,

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<sup>46</sup> Salutati *De Laboribus Deorum* 1:86-87, as translated and quoted by Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: The Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 224-25.

and artists were freed to draw both form and subject from Antiquity without obscuring either under a veil of Christianity.

This perceived continuity of cultures has been described by various scholars in relation to Salutati's writing, in particular the *De Laboribus Herculis*. Thus, wrote Ronald Witt:

While only a few passages in all of ancient poetry appeared divinely inspired because of their prophetic nature, nonetheless the belief that at some point ancient poetry bridged the gulf between natural and supernatural truth exercised a pervasive effect on Salutati's attitude toward ancient literature in general, causing him to assume a continuity between pagan and Christian culture.<sup>47</sup>

Charles Trinkaus, who discussed these developments at some length, has provided such a fine summary of the principles here discussed that the relevant passage deserves an extended quotation:

Thus in greatly expanding the application of the allegorical method of interpretation to the pagan poets he [Salutati] was simultaneously staying within an old and Christian tradition of Biblical and literary exegesis and opening it up to include the necessary and expanded vision of human life. Thus he fulfills the need that was at that time felt to relate the wide world of the poets' imagination to the Christian world of the Renaissance, to show that not only Dante and Petrarch composed poetry with Christian meaning, but that, if Christian meaning was also human meaning, this legitimately could and should be sought in Homer and Virgil as well. It meant a movement towards a universalizing, not only of literature—a conception of the possibility of a world literature where a Christian Dante could stand beside a pagan Homer—but towards a universalizing of human experience, so that a Renaissance Christian might understand the experience of an ancient pagan and also find in it elements that were comparable to his own.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, 226.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (London: Constable & Co., 1970), 2:703.

Indeed, the concepts presented above are not entirely new to studies of Renaissance literature and philosophy. This study draws from the work of scholars in those fields. Here, however, certain particulars regarding the nature of medieval exegesis and the differences between medieval and Renaissance interpretative systems are more fully developed here than in other scholarship. It is also the unique purpose of this study to consider the significance of these developments with regard to the history of Italian Renaissance art, given that scholars of art history has not fully realized the significance of the Trecento developments herein described.

A detailed understanding of medieval and Renaissance systems of interpretation is essential to art historical discourse, not only so that the differences between the periods can be more correctly realized and the particular qualities of the Italian Renaissance distinguished, but also in order that modern methods of interpreting Renaissance art may more accurately recognize meanings that are potentially inherent in representations of classical subjects during that period. The change in interpretative method that is reflected in the claims made by Dante, Boccaccio, and Salutati in the Italian Trecento made it possible for authors to juxtapose pagan and Christian subjects within a single work, to describe characters from pagan myth as types for figures from the Judeo-Christian narrative, and to explore the mysteries of the Christian faith which, in their perception, lay hidden beneath the literal representation of classical subjects. These practices must be recognized as essentially “Renaissance,” i.e. as characteristic of the manner in which Renaissance authors responded to the remains of classical Antiquity. The same practices characterize the response of Renaissance artists to the remains of classical Antiquity and

are represented in the use of classical subjects in the visual art of the period. Though medieval artists did occasionally depict classical subjects in their works of art or include motifs or forms borrowed from classical prototypes, this use of classical subjects primarily conformed to the interpretative modes allowed to secular literature in the medieval period. Thus, in this period, classical subjects were primarily represented and interpreted according to their perceived historical, physical, or moral significances. In contrast, Renaissance authors and artists expanded the interpretation of classical subjects to include also those modes of allegorical significance which had previously been allowed only to sacred texts, and, as a result, Renaissance art includes depictions of classical subjects in typological juxtaposition with Christian subjects and, either through a perceived typological significance or in a more direct, anagogical manner, employs classical subjects as a means even of revealing the mysteries of the Christian faith.

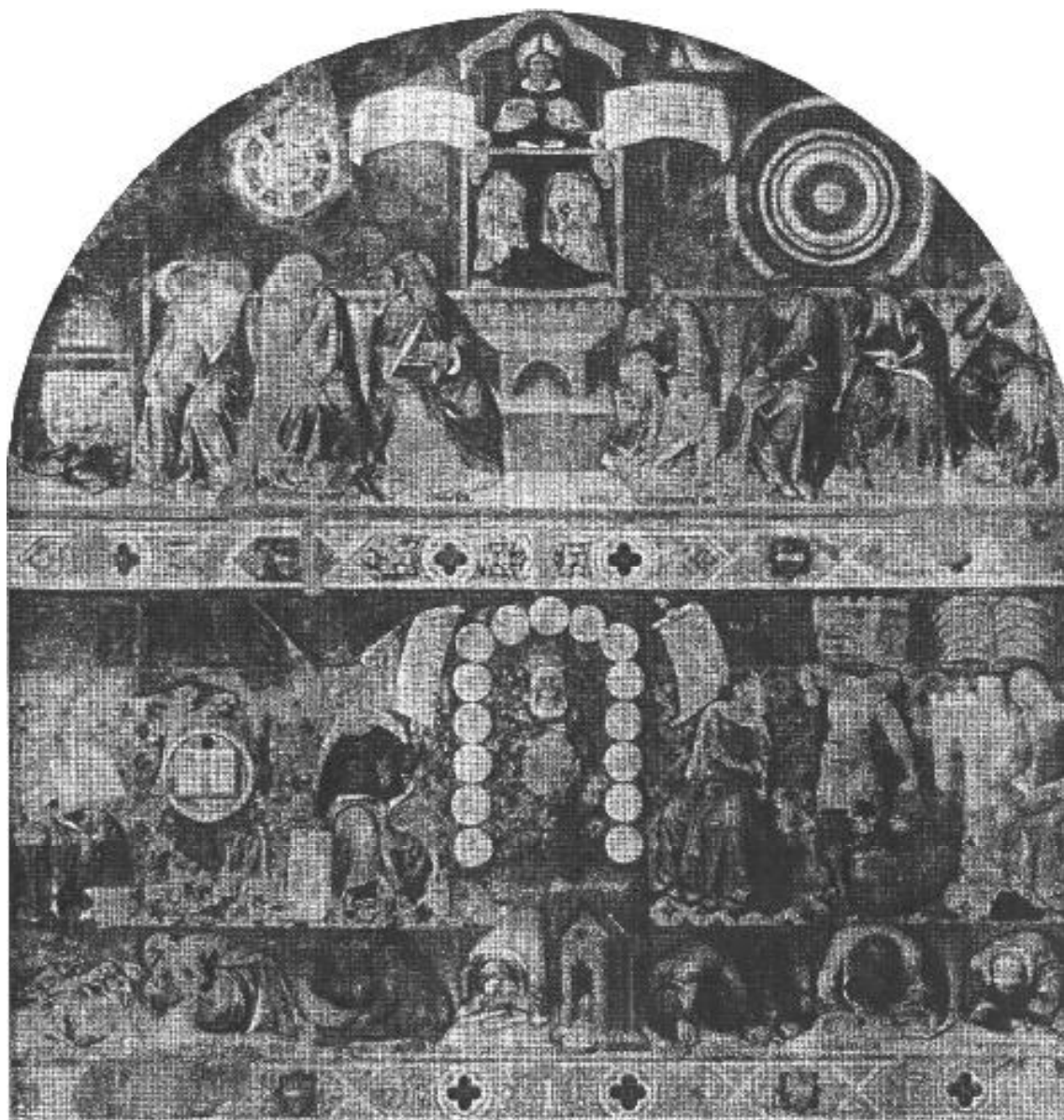


Figure 1 – Fresco from the chapel of Sant'Agostino in the church of Sant'Andrea, Ferrara, now Pinacoteca Nazionale, Ferrara.

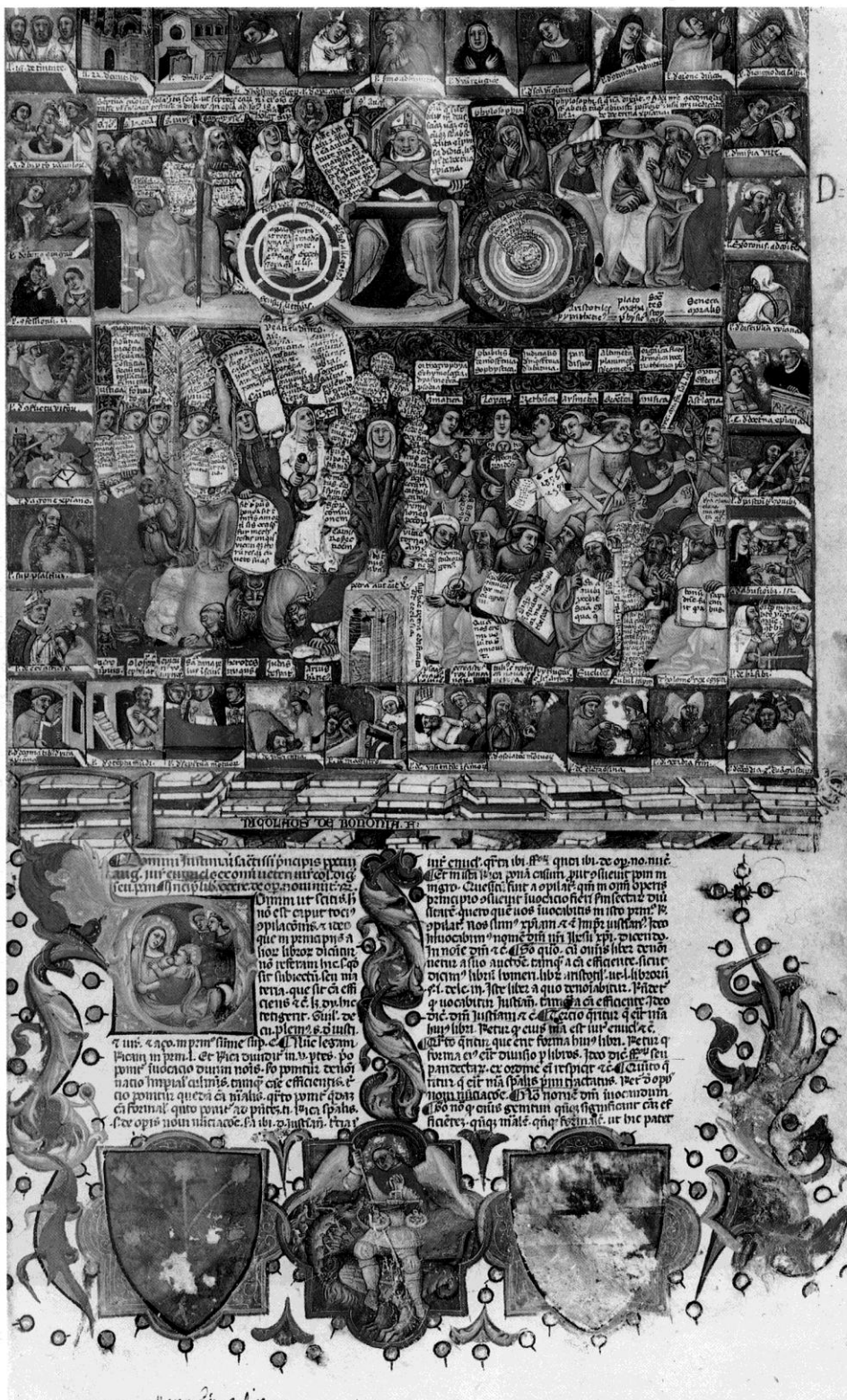


Figure 2 – Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, Ms. N. 197, folio 3r.



Figure 3 – Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Ms. B. 42 Inf.

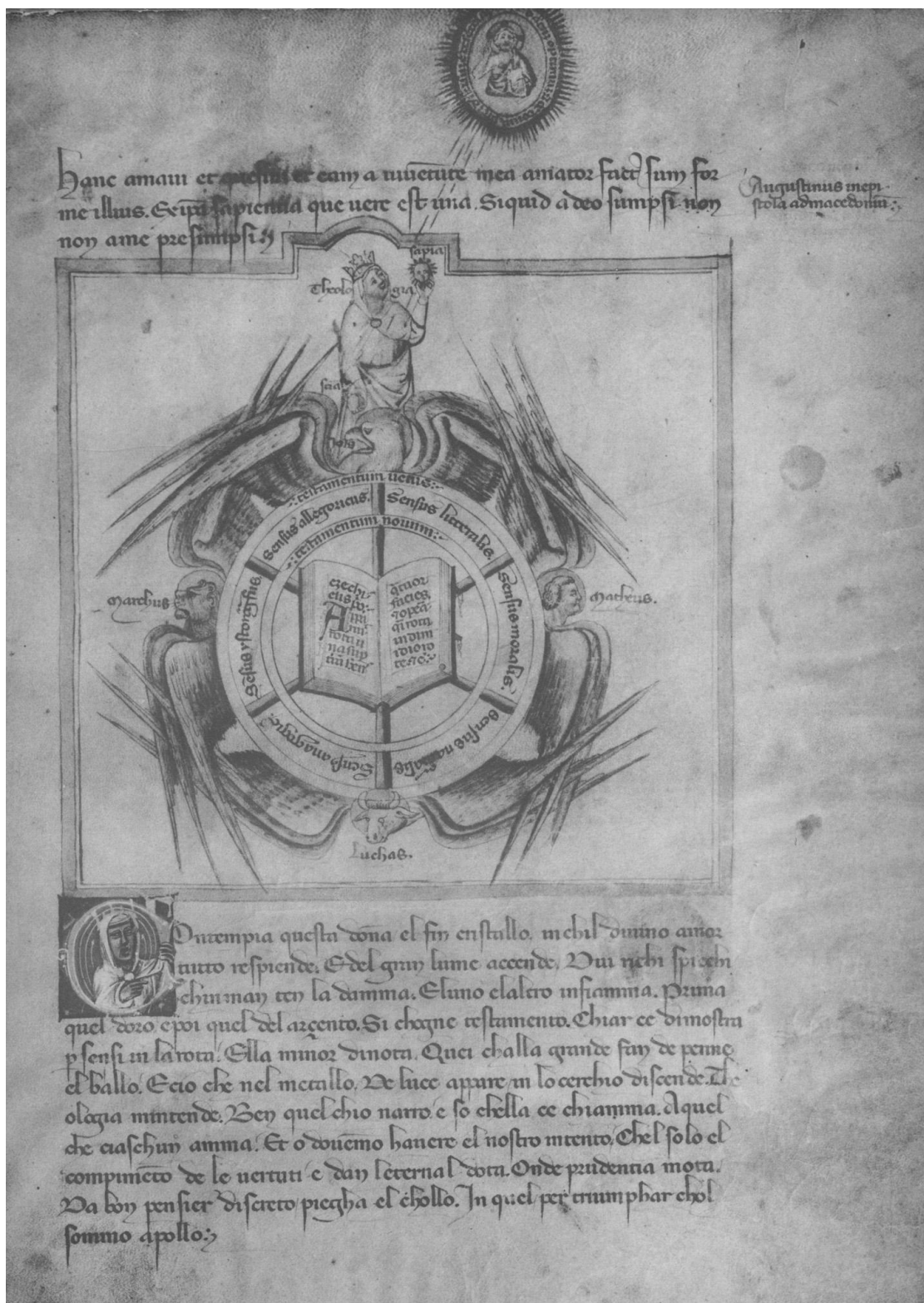


Figure 4 – Chantilly, Musée Condé, Cd. XX 6426, B



## CHAPTER 2

TYPOLOGY AND ANAGOGY IN RENAISSANCE MURAL DECORATION:  
 THE ARENA CHAPEL, PADUA, THE CHAPTERHOUSE OF SANTA MARIA  
 NOVELLA, FLORENCE, AND THE CAPPELLA NOVA, ORVIETO

The typological relationship of stories or events from the Old and New Testaments was frequently represented in Christian art, from its origins in the first centuries C.E. through the so-called Medieval period of European history. Examples abound and include both well and lesser known works of art: Jonah as a type for Christ in the decoration of Roman catacombs and on Early Christian sarcophagi, numerous examples of Mosan enamel work of the twelfth-century, among them the famed Klosterneuberg Altar Frontal, and an equally sublime, if less ostentatious illustration from the twelfth-century *Legendarium Cisterciense*, in which the Madonna and Child are surrounded by Moses at the Burning Bush, Gideon and his fleece, Daniel in the lion's den, and the three Hebrews in the furnace.<sup>1</sup> (Figure 5) In such a work as the *Legendarium Cisterciense*, the juxtaposition of types did more than simply establish the existence of parallels between the figures or stories of the two Testaments. The typological juxtaposition of figures allowed the medieval artist to communicate significant meaning which would otherwise be difficult to convey artistically: here, the perpetual virginity of Mary was glossed in four scenes in which a person or object remains inviolate though its condition or surroundings would normally dictate its consumption or corruption. Though Renaissance artists, in certain instances, developed alternate means of expressing doctrinal themes of this sort—Michelangelo Buonarroti famously defended the youthful

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<sup>1</sup> See, as examples, the Jonah cycle in the Catacomb of Pietro e Marcellino, the Balfour Ciborium, now in the collection of the Morgan Library, and the Klosterneuberg Altar Frontal. The *Legendarium Cisterciense* is Dijon, bib. Mun. Ms 641.

appearance of Mary in his *Pietà* (Figure 6) as an expression of her perpetual virginity—the typological juxtaposition of Old and New Testament subjects remained a valid means of conveying significant meaning.<sup>2</sup> The 1481 cycle of decoration on the walls of the Sistine Chapel followed a typological program, pairing scenes from the life of Moses with scenes from the life of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Here, as in the *Legendarium Cisterciense*, the message was greater than the sum of its parts. In pairing the *Punishment of Korah* with the scene of Christ giving the keys to Peter, for example, the architects of the program did not simply illustrate the calling of Old and New Testament priests, but glossed that latter event as the establishment of a true priesthood with legitimate authority, as that of Aaron over the Hebrews, in opposition to the false claims of Korah and his followers.

It is not the inclusion or representation of typologically related scenes or figures that distinguishes the art of the Middle Ages from that of the Renaissance. Artists and iconographers of both periods proved themselves adept at the juxtaposition of Old and New Testament scenes and employed this interpretative and artistic convention more or less consistently as a means of conveying the allegorical meaning that was, according to patristic exegesis, perceived as inherent in the relationship of Biblical types. The distinction is not in the use of typological juxtaposition as an artistic trope, per se, but in the range of subjects that were represented as significant types in the art of the Italian Renaissance, as compared to the range of subjects represented as types in medieval art. Where medieval exegetes and artists saw and represented typological parallels in the

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<sup>2</sup> On Michelangelo's explanation of Mary's youth and the relationship between her appearance and her perpetual virginity, see Condivi, as in Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 48.

<sup>3</sup> On the program of the walls of the Sistine Chapel, Leopold Ettliger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo: Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); Carol Lewine, *The Sistine Chapel Walls and the Roman Liturgy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

subjects of the Old and New Testaments, Renaissance artists, authors, and philosophers posited parallels and typological relationships also between figures and events from the Judeo-Christian narrative and figures and events from world history and secular literature. Furthermore, as the range of perceived typological relationships expanded, ultimately to include even pagan mythology as a source for types to Christian figures and themes, Renaissance artists and iconographers found and conveyed Christian meaning in the perceived anagogical significance of extra-Biblical, even pagan sources. These developments and practices are seen in Renaissance literature, as described in the previous chapter. These developments and practices may be seen also in Renaissance art, as demonstrated here by a comparison of the decorative, typological, and anagogical programs of three Renaissance chapels: the Arena Chapel in Padua, the Chapterhouse or Cappellone degli Spagnuoli of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, and the Cappella Nova or Cappella di San Brizio of Orvieto Cathedral. In each of these chapels, the authors and executors of the decorative program juxtaposed scenes from disparate traditions in a typological manner. The range of sources differed, however, in each example. Thus, a comparison of the three programs shows the expansion of typology from a conventional pairing of Old and New Testament types, to an innovative juxtaposition of New Testament and contemporary events, which are still sacred if not strictly Biblical, and ultimately to a more syncretic cycle of Biblical, extra-Biblical, and classical narratives that depends not only on a perceived classical / Judeo-Christian typology, but also on the perception of an anagogical meaning inherent in scenes and subjects from classical mythology. The expansion of typological juxtapositions and anagogical representation depicted in these three chapels illustrates the very shift in the perception of allegorical meaning in sacred and secular texts that was claimed successively by Dante, Boccaccio, and Salutati and proves a parallel path for art in the developing Renaissance.

## The Arena Chapel, Padua

Giotto di Bondone's fresco decoration of the Arena Chapel in Padua is sufficiently known to art historical discourse to require but little introduction.<sup>4</sup> The chapel was begun in 1303 and formally dedicated in 1305, and the fresco decoration dates to those few years or, perhaps, to the years immediately after that date. The interior of the chapel is divided by painted bands of fictive architecture into three registers of narrative scenes on the side and altar walls, a decorative vault above, and a *dado* of fictive marble alternating with monochromatic figures representing various virtues and their opposing vices. (Figure 7) The narrative scenes of the side walls include scenes from the Life of Joachim, the Life of the Virgin, and the Life of Christ. These narrative scenes have long been included in the art historical cannon and are variously described and reproduced in survey texts and specialist studies. A series of smaller scenes painted on medallions that decorate the bands of fictive architecture, however, is described and reproduced much less frequently and has been the subject of dedicated study only on two notable occasions, in a chapter and an article published, respectively, by Aldo Bertini and Claudio Bellinati.<sup>5</sup> Bertini's study was largely iconographic and connoisseurial in

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<sup>4</sup> See, among other works, James Stubblebine, ed., *Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969); Andrew Ladis, ed., *The Arena Chapel and the Genius of Giotto* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998); and Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Giotto* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Aldo Bertini, "Per la Conoscenza dei Medaglioni che Accompagnano le Storie della Vita di Gesu' nella Cappella degli Scrovegni," in *Giotto e il suo tempo*, Atti del Congresso Internazionale per la celebrazione del VII centenario della nascita di Giotto (Rome: De Luca Editore, 1971), 143-47; Claudio Bellinati, "Tipologia e Arte nei Medaglioni della Cappella di Giotto all'Arena," *Padova e la sua Provincia* 18:5 (1972), 7-10. Note that these scenes have been reproduced and mentioned by other scholars, though not as dedicated subjects of study and often in passing. See, for example, Stubblebine, *Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes*, who reproduced two portions from the "decorative frieze" as figures 72 and 73, but described these only as symbolic vignettes,

methodology. Bellinati, on the other hand, rightly recognized the scenes within the smaller medallions as typological precedents of the larger narrative subjects which are represented in the chapel's primary cycle of decoration. The medallions appear only on the north wall of the chapel—on the south wall, the larger narrative scenes are divided by the actual architecture of the chapel, by a series of windows that pierce the wall at the level of the lower two bands of narrative scenes, and the fictive architectural bands do not appear. The decoration of the north wall includes a total of ten medallions, of which nine depict scenes from the Old Testament. As Bellinati has observed, the Old Testament scenes in the medallions are parallels or types for the scenes of the larger narrative cycle of events from the Life of Christ, which they accompany as follows: the Circumcision of the son of Abraham (Figure 8) is painted in the medallion to the left of the narrative scene of the Baptism of Christ; Moses striking the Rock (Figure 9) accompanies the Marriage Feast at Cana; the Creation of Adam (Figure 10) accompanies the Raising of Lazarus; Elisha Entering Jericho (fig. 11) accompanies Christ Entering Jerusalem; the Archangel Michael Triumphant Over the Devil (Figure 12) accompanies the Expulsion of the Money Changers; Moses and the Brazen Serpent (Figure 13) accompanies the Crucifixion; Jonah Swallowed by a Fish accompanies the Lamentation (Figure 14); Elisha Assumed Into Heaven (Figure 15) accompanies the Ascension of Christ; and God Appearing to Ezekiel (Figure 16) accompanies the narrative scene of Pentecost.<sup>6</sup> The

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on page 75: “To balance the windows, Giotto introduced decorative bands opposite them on the north wall, and these contain little vignettes or heads in quatrefoils, which symbolically echo the episodes in the large scenes nearby.”

<sup>6</sup> These were described by Bellinati, “Tipologia e Arte,” 9, and Bertini, “Per la Conoscenza dei Medaglioni,” 143-47. The only substantial difference in their identification of scenes is in regard to the medallion to the left of the *Pentecost* panel. Bertini identified the scene according to its apparent representation as God giving the Law to Moses. Bellinati described this as a representation of Ezekiel receiving a book from God, according to Ezekiel 3:1-15, in which the Prophet is visited by God, given a scroll to eat, and sent out to speak to the Jews, who would listen regardless of his

only medallion not depicting a story from the Old Testament shows, instead, a lion breathing life into his stillborn cubs (Figure 17), and is placed in juxtaposition with the Resurrection of Christ.

In the Arena Chapel, the inclusion of typological motifs in addition to the scenes from the Life of Christ shows that these were not intended to be interpreted only in a literal or narrative fashion. Rather, the juxtaposition of scenes from the Old Testament draws particular attention to the type, i.e. to the parallel theme or quality which allows a typological relationship. Thus, in each instance, an allegorical interpretation was evoked, in addition to the narrative depicted. For example, the Old Testament subject of Jonah entering the mouth of the great fish is a typological parallel to the Entombment of Jesus—this is established in the Gospel text, by the words of Jesus: that as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.<sup>7</sup> The juxtaposition of this subject with the New Testament scene commonly described as the Lamentation over the Body of Christ highlights the shared theme of Entombment. Because the narrative depicted in the larger panel is not a scene of the Entombment, the pairing of images glosses the Lamentation by pairing it with a typological representation of that event and leads the viewer to consider particular themes or qualities that are common to both subjects. (Figure 18) Thus, in the Arena Chapel, the viewer is to recognize not only a narrative sequence of events from the Life of Christ, but is to reflect on the subjects depicted and to contemplate the themes represented in the typological pairing of larger narrative panels and their accompanying medallions. The apparent attention to themes, rather than simply subjects, may give

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language—a closer parallel to the New Testament story of Pentecost. I find Bellinati's reading more convincing, particularly as it finds support in the typology that defines the relationship between medallion and New Testament elsewhere in the program of the Arena Chapel.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-30.

support to those scholars who have suggested that the narrative scenes have relevance in their position and opposition, in particular Ursula Schlegel's proposition that the *Betrayal of Judas* was included and placed not solely in relation to the progress of a narrative cycle, but in order to highlight the significance of its underlying theme of Betrayal.<sup>8</sup>

The iconographic program of the Arena Chapel is conventional, medieval, in its use of typological juxtaposition—the allegorical meaning that is perceived as inherent in the Judeo-Christian narrative is revealed through the juxtaposition of scenes, events, or figures from the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, this may be as expected, given that the chapel was decorated in the few years immediately prior to Dante's work on the *Divine Comedy*, and it is in that work, or properly in Dante's discussion of the polysemitaity of the *Divine Comedy* in his letter to Can Grande, that an Italian author first claims for an extra-Biblical work the same degrees of allegorical interpretation present in the Biblical narrative, including typological allegory. The Arena Chapel decoration is, nevertheless, a proper foil to later Trecento examples of mural decoration in which Biblical subjects are presented in typological juxtaposition with extra-Biblical scenes. This is the case with the mural decoration of the Guidalotti Chapel or Cappellone degli Spagnuoli—the Chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella, in Florence.

#### The Chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella, Florence

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<sup>8</sup> Among them Michael Alpatoff, "The Parallelism of Giotto's Paduan Frescoes," *Art Bulletin* 29:3 (1947), 149-54, and Ursula Schlegel, "On the Picture Program of the Arena Chapel," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 22 (1957), 125-46. I disagree with Alpatoff's reading of the significance of the superposed images, but his method of inquiry is interesting, and his implicit recognition that the themes of the narrative scenes have significance is to be commended.

The Chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella was decorated with frescoes some sixty years after the Arena Chapel in Padua, in a project that spanned the years 1365 to 1368.<sup>9</sup> The fresco cycle, executed by and under Andrea di Bonaiuto, covers the four walls and their crowning groin vault with scenes from the Passion cycle of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, and with narratives and allegories constructed around the Dominican saints Dominic, Peter Martyr, and Thomas Aquinas. It is the relationship between these scenes and subjects that is of greatest importance to this study, for here the artist and iconographic advisors can be seen to have deviated substantially from the typical conventions of typological representation as practiced in the preceding centuries. Here, scenes from the lives of contemporary religious figures, painted on the walls of the chapel, are juxtaposed with events described in the Biblical narrative, painted in the vault quadrants above. Though the scenes painted on the walls are not Biblical, the actions and events depicted there parallel those which are depicted in the Biblical scenes above and relate to them in a typological manner.

The program of decoration in the chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella is elaborate and complex, with subtle and varied relationships between its different components. In essence, or in summary, the decoration on the walls and vaults presents a series of scenes from the Passion and Resurrection of Christ together with scenes that depict and celebrate the actions and goals of the Dominican Order. These two themes are intricately interwoven and interdependent. The iconographic cycle may be said to begin on the north wall of the chapterhouse, directly opposite the entry into that room from the

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<sup>9</sup> The most significant recent studies on the Guidalotti Chapel are Richard Offner and Klara Steinweg, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting*, sec. 4, vol. 4 (New York: College of Fine Arts, New York University, 1979); and Joseph Polzer, "Andrea di Bonaiuto's *Via Veritatis* and Dominican Thought in Late Medieval Italy," *Art Bulletin* 77:2 (June 1995), 262-89. Offner and Steinweg include a critical history of earlier scholarship. On the date of the chapterhouse frescoes, see Offner and Steinweg, *Critical and Historical Corpus*, 17; Polzer, "Andrea di Bonaiuto's *Vita Veritatis*," 263.



adjoining cloister. This wall (Figure 19) is pierced by an archway which leads, in turn, to an adjacent chapel dedicated to the Corpus Christi, and the decorative program may have extended into that space as well, though later over-painting now obscures any possibility of realizing its subject or significance.<sup>10</sup> The remaining space on the north wall, a great arc over the entrance into the Corpus Christi chapel, is filled with three scenes from the Passion cycle, reading from the lower left, over the arch, to the lower right: the Road to Calvary, the Crucifixion, and the Harrowing of Hell, respectively. The Passion cycle continues in the vault quadrant over the north wall (Figure 20), with scenes of the Three Marys Coming to the Tomb, the Resurrection of Christ, and the *Noli Me Tangere*. Finally, this sequence culminates in the opposite vault, that which is over the south wall, with an Ascension of Christ (Figure 21). Though the Passion cycle unfolds on the north-south axis of the chapterhouse, there is also an iconographic progression from the lower right scene of the north wall, the Harrowing of Hell, to the upper left corner of the east wall, where the very same figures who were imprisoned by demons and freed by Christ at his descent are now gathered triumphantly within the walls of Heaven. (Figure 22) Noah, David, and John the Baptist are easily identified within the crowd of figures who are freed from Hell on the north wall, and they stand again with the crowd of figures gathered in Heaven on the east wall, adjacent, now at the front of the assembled masses, who include numerous Christian Saints as well as those saved from the Old Testament. All of these Elect turn their attention to the Beatific Vision of Jesus Enthroned, flanked by the Virgin and angels and placed over the sacrificial Lamb and four Beasts, at the apex of the east wall fresco. This Vision is not strictly Biblical, though it certainly derives from the visions of Ezekiel and John. Rather, this vision is contemporary, occurring,

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<sup>10</sup> Offner and Steinweg, *Critical and Historical Corpus*, 18: “The frescoes on the north wall of the Corpus Domini Chapel must have referred to the mystery of Corpus Domini and may still exist beneath the later decoration of 1592.”

according to Trecento doctrine, at time after the Resurrection and before the Last Judgment, or at the same time as other events depicted in the fresco, even at the same time as the fresco is viewed by the Renaissance visitor to the chapterhouse.<sup>11</sup>

The scenes on the east and west walls and on the entry wall to the south are all extra-Biblical in subject and depict scenes that occur not in the Biblical past, but in the Renaissance present, essentially contemporary to the decoration of the chapterhouse. The east wall presents an extended scene of the path to salvation through truth and the guidance of the Dominican Order. Below the Beatific Vision and the Host of Heaven, St. Dominic directs penitent souls toward Heaven's gates and, on the lowest level of the composition, the hierarchy of the Church sits to the left while St. Dominic, on the right, sends forth the *domini canes* and Saints Peter Martyr and Thomas Aquinas preach to doubters and heretics, respectively. The wall opposite is given to a representation of Thomas Aquinas Enthroned, flanked by wise men from both the Old and New Testaments, with the Virtues personified above him and defeated heretics at his feet. (Figure 23) Across the bottom of this wall are fourteen enthroned female figures—personifications of the seven Spiritual Sciences and the seven Liberal Arts—together with their historical representatives. Three events from the Life of Peter Martyr, now heavily damaged, decorate the entry wall to the south. (Figure 24)

The two remaining scenes, painted on the vault quadrants above the east and west walls, are essential for understanding the perceived relationship between Biblical and extra-Biblical events, as depicted in the chapterhouse. Both vault quadrants are painted with scenes from the Bible. The *Triumph of St. Thomas* on the west wall is surmounted

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<sup>11</sup> On the Beatific Vision, and its acceptance as doctrine, see the constitution *Benedictus Deus*, by Pope Benedict XII, issued on January 29, 1336, reproduced in Catholic Church, *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation*, (St. Louis, MO: Herder Book Co., 1955), 349-51.

by an elaborated depiction of Pentecost: the Dove of the Holy Spirit descends on the Virgin and Apostles, who are elevated in an architectural construction over the men from all nations, to whom the Apostles will minister.<sup>12</sup> (Figure 25) The vault quadrant over the east wall is filled by a ship carrying the Apostles over a stormy sea. (Figure 26) In the lower right corner of this composition, Peter has walked on the water toward Jesus and, having doubted and fallen through the surface, is saved by him. This particular detail has largely been overshadowed in interpretative scholarship by the boat above—the *navicella*—which has been viewed as an allegorical parallel to the Florentine Duomo depicted in the fresco on the wall below.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, while scholars such as Steinweg and Meiss have correctly posited a relationship—a unity of theme, to paraphrase—between the scenes painted in the vault quadrants and on the side walls below,<sup>14</sup> the particulars of this relationship have not been fully explored, due in part to a tendency of scholars either to gloss over or to completely ignore the numerous inscriptions included within the decorative frame of each scene and, as a result, to misinterpret the significance of each scene and the apparent relationships between the vault and wall frescoes.

Modern interpretation of the east wall and vault quadrant has been largely shaped by Adolfo Venturi's 1907 study, in which he posited a relationship between the frescoes of the chapterhouse and the *Specchio di vera penitenza* by Jacopo Passavanti.<sup>15</sup> Venturi

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<sup>12</sup> Offner and Steinweg, *Critical and Historical Corpus*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Offner and Steinweg, *Critical and Historical Corpus*, 36; Polzer, "Andrea di Boniuto's *Vita Veritatis*," 279-81.

<sup>14</sup> Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 94-104.

<sup>15</sup> Venturi, Adolfo. *Stori dell'Arte Italiana: v. La Pittura del Trecento e le sue Origini* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1907).

noted both the similarities and differences between the scene painted in the eastern vault quadrant and Giotto's mosaic of the *navicella*—the Church as a ship of the Apostles and Peter saved by Jesus from sinking below the waves—at the old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Furthermore, Venturi noted that the Church-as-ship allegory featured repeatedly in Passavanti's *Specchio*, and thus had a place in a program designed around the interrelated concepts of salvation and the means toward salvation through penitence.<sup>16</sup> Subsequent scholarship has largely retained Venturi's view of the boat as an allegorical representation of the Church, though authors have variously critiqued or defended the connection between the iconographic program and Passavanti's *Specchio*.<sup>17</sup> The series of inscriptions that gloss the scene from its decorative frame, however, suggest that the Renaissance program was designed with a different theme in mind—that the episode of Peter saved by Christ was of primary importance, rather than the ship of the Apostles. Thus, though modern scholars have largely viewed the scene as an allegorical representation of the Church and a parallel to Duomo and its assembled dignitaries, the Renaissance viewer was directed by these framing inscriptions to look on the salvation of Peter and to recognize the typological relationship between Jesus' action in that scene and St. Dominic's action in the fresco below.

Andrea di Bonaiuto's fresco decoration in the chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella is notable for its lack of framing divisions within each of the architectural fields—the vault quadrants and the walls themselves. This was noted by Vasari and has been

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<sup>16</sup> Venturi, *Stori dell'Arte Italiana*, 778-82.

<sup>17</sup> Note that Offner and Steinweg did not see a direct correlation between the fresco cycle and the *Specchio*, nor did Meiss, while Polzer's article was very strongly in support of Venturi and expanded on his original argument with additional evidence supporting a theme of penitence.

described by modern scholars who traced the development of Trecento painting.<sup>18</sup> The greater program of decoration, however, does include framing bands painted around the edges of each vault quadrant, separating the vault sections from themselves and from the scenes on the walls below. These bands are painted with repeating floral patterns and appear to be largely decorative, but include also an extensive series of figured medallions. The medallion at the apex of the north wall, and thus directly over the scene of the Crucifixion, contains a pelican feeding its young with blood from its breast. The medallion at the apex of the east wall bears the figure of Christ, who gestures toward Thomas Aquinas, enthroned on the wall below. These two are exceptions to the pattern repeated throughout the remainder of the chapterhouse—each of the remaining forty-six medallions contains a half-length figure holding a scroll inscribed with Latin text. Thus, a total of forty-six inscriptions line the room, surrounding the narrative and allegorical scenes depicted on its mural surfaces. Ironically, these inscriptions have been largely ignored by modern scholars. Only Offner and Steinweg, who listed by chapter and verse the Biblical passages from which the inscriptions are taken, gave the inscriptions more than a passing and summary mention.<sup>19</sup> The inscriptions, which are brief and often abbreviated excerpts from the Old and New Testament, gloss the scenes that are depicted in the chapterhouse and offer an invaluable key toward understanding its iconographic program.

The seven inscriptions included in the framing band that arches over the eastern vault quadrant make no mention whatsoever of the boat that is painted there, nor of the Apostles in the boat, but focus the reader's attention on the figures of Peter and Christ

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<sup>18</sup> Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena*, 95. Meiss noted Vasari's praise of this aspect of the chapterhouse decoration.

<sup>19</sup> Offner and Steinweg, *Critical and Historical Corpus*, 73.

painted in the lower right corner of the composition. In particular, these inscriptions highlight Peter's lack of faith and, conversely, the charge from the book of James, chapter 1: *postulet autem in fide nihil haesitans* / "Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering." This passage, abbreviated as POSTULET I[N] AU[TEM] E NIHIL and POSTULET I[N] FIDE NICHIL HESITA[N]S, is inscribed on the scrolls held by figures in the medallions at the top of the vault and again at the lower right, respectively. The inscription in the medallion to the lower left continues the text of James 1:6–QUI HESITAT SILIS [lacuna] EST FILUET [lacuna] / "He that wavereth is like a wave of the sea." This portion of the text provides a contrast with the man who is strong in faith and relates the passage to Peter, whose lack of faith is described in three of the other inscriptions, drawn from Matthew chapter 14. The inscription in the center right medallion relates Peter's fear–VER[O] VIDISSET VE[N]TUM VALIDU[M] TIMUIT / "Seeing the wind strong, he was afraid"—and that in the center left medallion has him sink beneath the waves–CU[M] C[O]EPISSET MERGI CLAMIVIT DICE[NS] / "When he began to sink he cried out." Immediately above, in the inscription in the upper left medallion, Jesus questions Peter's lack of faith: AIT ILLI MODIC[A]E FIDEI QUARE DUBITASTI / "O thou of little faith, why didst thou doubt?" The remaining inscription, that in the medallion to the upper right, is taken from another story, described in John chapter 21, in which Peter leaves the other Apostles in a boat and hastens across the water toward Jesus. The excerpt painted in the chapterhouse describes Peter girding his coat about him before jumping into the water: UT AUDIVIT PETRUS Q[UI]A D[OMI]N[U]S ESSET TUNIC[AM] / "Peter, when he heard that it was the Lord, gird his coat." This inscription draws the scene, conceptually, into the Passion cycle depicted on the north-south axis of the vault, as the account in John takes place between the Resurrection and the Ascension, though the earlier event from Matthew is more fully recounted in inscriptions and more accurately depicted in the fresco.

The evidence provided by the inscriptions surrounding the eastern vault quadrant suggest that its painted scene was intended as a representation of the importance of faith and the means of salvation from doubt through the agent of Christ, rather than as any mystic ship of penitence, boat of St. Peter, or conceptual Church. This representation, in turn, is typologically related to the scene painted on the eastern wall, below, though this will only be recognized when the lower scene, as well, has been reinterpreted according to the gloss of the inscriptions which surround it. The inscriptions over the eastern vault quadrant focus the reader / viewer on the doubt of Peter and the saving action of Jesus. Similarly, the inscriptions over the eastern wall focus the reader / viewer on the action of Dominic in saving those who have turned from doubt or wavered in their faith. There, the texts written on the medallion scrolls draw attention to the Saints in Heaven, who witness the Beatific Vision, and to St. Dominic, hailed as a shining light, a morning star, and a herald. Thus, the inscriptions on the medallions at the apex of the arch and at the lower left corner of the arch praise the Saints, reading, respectively: BEATI QUI AD CENAM NUPITARUM AGNI VOCATI SUNT / “Blessed are they who are called to the marriage feast of the lamb,” from Revelation 19:9, and DECOR EST OM[N]IBUS S[AN]C[TOR]IS EIUS / “This glory is to all his saints,” a portion of Psalm 149:9, altered. An inscription to the upper left draws attention to Dominic, as it quotes from John 5:35: ILLE ERAT LUCERNA ARDE[N]S ET LUCENS / “He was a bright and shining light.” The inscription opposite, on the right side of the wall, takes from Daniel 3:4: PRAECO CLAMABAT VALENTER VOBIS / “Then a herald cried with a strong voice.” The inscription to the lower right draws from Ecclesiasticus, 50:6: QUASI STELLA MATUTINA I[N] MEDIO NEBULAE ET QUASI LUNA PLENA I[N] DIEBUS SUIS / “(He shone) in his days as the morning star in the midst of a cloud and as the moon at the full.” If, in the original context of John, Daniel, and Ecclesiasticus, these passages refer to John the Baptist, to a Babylonian herald, and to Simon the High Priest,

respectively, here they apply to St. Dominic, who is active in the center of the composition, and who exhibits an action that is parallel in theme to that of Christ in the vault above. Both Dominic and Jesus offer salvation to those who are brought out of doubt to faith. Just as Jesus calls forth Peter from the boat and raises him from the turbulent waves of wavering faith, so, too, Dominic is a herald, who cries in a strong voice and calls the Blessed to the marriage feast of the Lamb. Herein lies the significant relationship between the two frescoes, in a typology of figures and events and in the types of Dominic and Jesus.

It is not only the shared action which reveals these figures as types, but also their juxtaposition in the fresco cycle of the chapterhouse. Apart from the scene in the vault, Dominic's action could be explained as a simple *imitatio Christi*, or removed from any Scriptural basis entirely, as has been typical in modern scholarship. The architect or architects of the iconographic program, however, placed these scenes in juxtaposition, and, through the inclusion of multiple inscriptions in the framing border, focused the viewer on certain figures and events in the two scenes that share a common action and theme. The greater number of inscriptions framing the lower scene refer to St. Dominic, and this, together with his prominence in the composition, shows him to be the primary focus of that scene. Furthermore, the action that he performs is paralleled by that of Jesus in the scene above. Herein lies the significant relationship, the essential purpose of the subject depicted in the vault and the cause of its inclusion. The vault scene is not first and foremost a *navicella*, a symbolic representation of the Church that is pictured, also allegorically if somewhat more literally, on the wall below, but a scriptural basis for the action of Dominic, who leads mortals out of doubt toward salvation and Heaven. This relationship, a similarity of action and theme in events from two distinct traditions, is typological, where a shared allegorical representation—church as Church and ship as



Church—would not have been, and has not been so identified by those scholars who have previously written on the chapterhouse frescoes.

The typological relationship that is presented in the juxtaposition of scenes on the eastern wall and eastern vault of the chapterhouse in Santa Maria Novella is not, however, a conventional or traditional typology. Artists and iconographers of the European Middle Ages, the Italian Trecento included, produced works of art in which figures or events from the two Testaments of the Bible were juxtaposed. The frescoes painted on the east side of the chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella present a juxtaposition of a Biblical subject and an extra-Biblical subject, an action or event that is essentially contemporary with the viewer and not described in the Biblical narrative. The very possibility that such a juxtaposition could have been viewed as typological depended on a broadening of parameters, such that extra-Biblical subjects could be perceived as polysemous in the same manner as subjects or events from the Bible, i.e. as having degrees of meaning that can be understood beyond the literal or moral significance. This, of course, was the very claim made by Dante in his letter to Can Grande: that his work, which was essentially religious in nature, if extra-Biblical, contained the same degrees of meaning that had previously been understood as present only in the Biblical narrative. What Dante had claimed for his *Divine Comedy*, the artists and iconographers of the Cappellone degli Spagnuoli practiced in their program of decoration.

Like the frescoes on the eastern side of the chapterhouse, those of the western wall and vault juxtapose a Biblical event with a contemporary figure in order to highlight a particular quality associated with that figure. St. Thomas Aquinas sits enthroned at the center of the scene painted on the western wall. A scene of Pentecost is painted in the vault quadrant above. (Figure 23) The passages inscribed in the medallions of the border framing the scene of Thomas Enthroned praise his wisdom: IPSE H[AB]ET CO[N]S[IL]IUM ET I[N]TELLENTIAM / “He hath counsel and understanding” (Job

12:13), PROFU[N]DA FLUVIORUM SCRUP[T]ATUS EST / “The depths of the rivers he hath searched” (Job 28:11), ILLUMINAS TU MIRABILITER A MONTIBUS ETERNIS / “Thou enlightenest wonderfully from the everlasting hills” (Psalm 75:5), QUAM SPETIOSA VARE SAPI[ENTIA] ET G[LORI]OSUS I[N]TELL[ECT]US / “O how beautiful is wisdom for the aged and understanding for men of honor” (Ecclesiasticus 25:7). An additional passage, inscribed on the book that Thomas holds open on his lap, makes clear the origin of his wisdom and establishes the typological relation between Thomas as the recipient of the Spirit and the Apostles as recipients of the Holy Spirit in the scene painted in the vault. The text on Thomas’ book is taken from the Biblical book of Wisdom (7:7-8): OPTAV[I] ET DAT[U]M SENSUS ET I[N]VOCAVI [E]T VENIT I[N] ME SP[IRITU]S SAPI[ENTIA]E ET P[RAE]POSUI ILLA[M] REGNIS ET SEDIBUS / “Wherefore I wished, and understanding was given me: and I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came upon me: And I preferred her to kingdoms and thrones.”<sup>20</sup> Similar themes are expressed in the inscriptions that surround the Apostles in the scene of Pentecost above: SP[IRITU]S QUI A PATER PROCEDIT ILLE VOS DOCEBIT / “The Holy Ghost who proceeds from the Father will teach you” (John 14:26), SP[IRITU]M TUU[M] BONU[M] DEDISTI EIS / “Thou gavest them thy good spirit” (Nehemiah 9:20), CUMQUE REQUIEVISSET I[N] EIS SP[IRITU]S PR[OPHET]AVERU[N]T / “When the Spirit had rested on them they prophesied” (Numbers 11:25), QUIS SCIVIT NISI TU DEDERIS SAP[IENT]IAM ET MIS[ERR]I[S] SP[IRITU]M / “Who know nothing except thou give wisdom and send thy Spirit” (Wisdom 9:17). These passages, drawn from the Gospel of John and the Old Testament books of Nehemiah and Wisdom, do not provide the source text for the scene

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<sup>20</sup> Polzer described and translated the inscription. Polzer, “Andrea di Boniuto’s *Vita Veritatis*,” 264-66.

of Pentecost represented in the western vault quadrant—this text is provided in the three uppermost inscriptions of the vault border<sup>21</sup>—but gloss that scene with additional references from the Biblical narrative and highlight the one aspect of that event—the descent of the spirit of wisdom from God to his earthly representative—which is represented also in the wall fresco, painted below.

Here, as on the wall opposite, the inscriptions over the wall fresco and over the vault quadrant emphasize shared aspects of the scenes or figures depicted and reveal a perceived typological relationship between figures or events from the New Testament and a figure or event that is extra-Biblical. This similarity of theme is made explicit in the medallion at the apex of the arch over the wall, from which the figure of Jesus looks down on Thomas and opens his arms toward him, as if in the very act of giving wisdom to the Dominican saint. This figure parallels the Dove of the Holy Spirit at the apex of the vault section, which descends to give wisdom to the gathered Apostles.

It is necessary again to point out that the particular relationship of scenes and figures juxtaposed in the frescoes of the chapterhouse is typological, even though the similarities of theme are shared by scenes that are Biblical and extra-Biblical. The relationship between Thomas Aquinas and the scene of Pentecost is precisely the same as that between the enthroned Madonna and Child and the surrounding scenes from the Old Testament in the *Legendarium Cisterciense*, described at the beginning of this chapter. (Figure 5) In the chapterhouse frescoes, as in that manuscript illumination, abstract

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<sup>21</sup> The three uppermost inscriptions of the vault border were taken from the second chapter of Acts and together describe the event depicted in that vault quadrant : FACTUS EST REPE[N]TE DE C[A]ELO SONUS TAMQUA[M] ADVENI[ENTIS] ET / “Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of (a wind) coming, and...” (Acts 2:2); APPARUERU[N]T APOSTOLIS DISPERTITE LINGUA[E] ET / “...there appeared to the Apostles parted tongues, and...” (Acts 2:3); REPLETI SU[N]T OMNE[S] SPIRITU S[AN]C[T]O ET C[O]EPPERU[N]T LOQUI / “...they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and the began to speak” (Acts 2:4).

qualities associated with a holy figure are represented through the juxtaposition of that figure with another figure or event from the Biblical narrative that expresses or epitomizes the same essential qualities. More than an artistic convention, this significant juxtaposition was both possible and legible in Christian art of the pre-Renaissance period due to the belief that the narrative of the Bible was constructed with levels of underlying allegory, including typological allegory, which convey meaning through the similarities of Old and New Testament figures and events. That the same manner of significant juxtaposition was employed in the chapterhouse frescoes of Santa Maria Novella shows that the same belief regarding the relationship between figures and events was here present, though the figures and events juxtaposed were not exclusively Biblical. The iconographic architects of the chapterhouse program revealed their perception that Thomas Aquinas, who is a Saint but not a figure from the Bible, could be typologically juxtaposed with an event from the Bible. The importance of such a perception is subtle but significant: where medieval exegesis allowed typological allegory only to the Biblical narrative, and works of art from the medieval period depicted typological relationships only between figures and event described in the Bible, in the Italian Trecento, Dante claimed the same degree of allegory for his own religious, but extra-Biblical work, and typological juxtapositions of figures and events that are Biblical and extra-Biblical begin to appear in Trecento works of art. Recognition of this particular development allows a more accurate reading and understanding of the complex interplay of scenes and subjects in the cycle of frescoes that decorate the chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella.

The scenes and subjects that decorate the chapterhouse are more accurately read and understood in relation to the inscriptions that surround them and make up a significant portion of the decorative program. In light of these inscriptions, it becomes possible to distinguish the intent of the iconographer from the work of the artist and to properly place the chapterhouse decorations in the larger context of Trecento

development. Scholars have correctly observed that in conceiving and composing the scene in the eastern vault quadrant Andrea di Bonaiuto worked from the model of Giotto's *Navicella* mosaic for the old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.<sup>22</sup> A comparison with that work, through surviving copies (Figures 27 and 28),<sup>23</sup> shows that Andrea re-worked portions of the scene to fit the triangular space of the vault quadrant, but retained all elements of the subject that are iconographically significant. The architects of the chapterhouse program, however, were able to shift the emphasis of the subject—to signal the particular manner in which they intended the scene to be read or interpreted—through the inclusion of textual glosses in the framing border. If the *Navicella* has suggested to other scholars, chiefly Venturi and Polzer, that the artist was working from Passavanti's *Speculum* according to a program dedicated to themes of penitence, the marginal glosses suggest a different intention. The border inscriptions make no mention of penitence, but emphasize faith. Similarly, the inscriptions surrounding the fresco on the wall below do not describe penitence, but focus the reader / viewer on St. Dominic as a herald of the Faith and as one who leads the Blessed toward their reward in Heaven. Though themes of penitence may be present within the greater subject of the *via veritatis*, the absence of any references to penitence within the textual inscriptions would suggest that this was not the primary message of the fresco and, as a result, that Passavanti's *Speculum* was not the primary inspiration for the iconographic program of the chapterhouse.

A similar process of artistic production and iconographic construction is apparent in the fresco on the eastern wall of the chapterhouse. In its overall composition and in particulars of its subject matter, the scene represented there is reminiscent of a

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<sup>22</sup> Offner and Steinweg, *Critical and Historical Corpus*, 62.

<sup>23</sup> Parri Spinelli's copy after Giotto's *Navicella*, executed c. 1400, is now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (19.76.2). Francesco Berretta's copy, painted in 1628, is now in the Fabbrica di San Pietro, Rome.

conventional depiction of the Last Judgment: God is enthroned in glory above, with angels and the Madonna over the Blessed and the Good at his right hand, and those in greater need of salvation at his left.<sup>24</sup> The artist appears to have modified the concept and composition of a Last Judgment to fit the new theme of the wall—not the day of reckoning, itself, but the path through St. Dominic and through the Faith which leads to salvation and the right hand of God, now and at that Judgment. Andrea and his team modified a Last Judgment composition and draw certain portions from other works in order to represent this new subject. Yet again, the iconographic program was revealed in the surrounding inscriptions, which provide the key toward understanding the essential subject of the work *and* how it relates in a typological manner to the scene above.

The same is true also of the frescoes on the west wall. The scene of Thomas enthroned belongs to a larger family of works that represent a scholar enthroned above the Sacred Sciences and Liberal Arts, as described in the first chapter of this study. Again, the artist responded to an available model and adapted the composition to the space provided. Again, the iconographic importance of the subject was described in the marginal inscriptions. Indeed, this method was largely traditional, and Andrea di Bonaiuto can not here be praised as a Renaissance artist in the manner of the subsequent Quattrocento, when an increasing importance would be placed on the *invenzione* of the artist rather than the program of the iconographer. Andrea's method belonged to the medieval practice of altering a preexisting composition to fit within the composition and program of a new space. The frescoes of the chapterhouse may be praised for their place in the development of Trecento composition, as Vasari and Meiss have noted, because each wall and vault quadrant is conceived as a single, expansive space and not divided

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<sup>24</sup> Meiss hinted repeatedly at this similarity in his description of the scene, though he did not pursue the comparison. Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena*, 95-98.

with internal frames into smaller sections. The frescoes of the chapterhouse must also be noted for their place in the development of Renaissance typology, for here the juxtaposition of scenes and the border inscriptions make clear that this program is designed according to a new and distinctly Renaissance belief that typological allegory is present in contemporary subjects as well as the narrative of the Bible.

The comparison of typological juxtapositions in the Arena Chapel, Padua, and in the Chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella shows an expansion of the perception of allegorical interpretation, such that the levels or degrees of allegorical meaning that were previously perceived as present only in Scripture were, by the mid Trecento, allowed or perceived also in extra-Biblical sources. This perception allowed a greater range of juxtaposed subjects, or more properly the understanding of significant meaning in the juxtaposition of those subjects, in Renaissance mural decoration. By the end of the Trecento, Italian authors had claimed the full range of allegorical interpretation—typological and anagogical as well as moral allegory—even for the stories of classical mythology. Little more than a century later, in the opening years of the Cinquecento, this claim formed the basis for the inclusion and significance of the classical subjects represented in the socle of the Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral.

### The Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral

The Cappella Nova is built into the south transept of Orvieto Cathedral, extending directly from the nave, with its entry through an iron gate to the north and its altar, which is dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin, to the south. The Cappella consists of two vaulted bays, very richly decorated with scenes depicting Christ Enthroned, the numerous populations of Heaven, the Blessed and the Damned at the Last Judgment, the End of Days and the Rule of the Antichrist (Figure 29). Though the fresco cycle was begun by

Fra Angelico (Fra Giovanni da Fiesole) in the summer of 1447, he and his shop completed only half of one of the two vaults in the Cappella—the vault quadrant directly over the altar, in which Christ sits enthroned in Judgment and surrounded by angels, and the eastern quadrant of that same vault, which is filled with a pyramidal arrangement of sixteen Old Testament prophets. The subsequent history of the Cappella decoration has been well documented and fully described in scholarly publication: the failed attempts, over the succeeding half-century, to secure a suitable artist to complete the program, and the eventual hiring of Luca Signorelli in 1499, first to complete the decoration of the vault, then to paint the lunettes on the walls under the vault, and finally, beginning in 1502, to complete the decoration of the Cappella with a series of portraits, grotesque decoration, and grisaille medallions in the socle.<sup>25</sup>

Signorelli's frescoes in the Cappella Nova are justifiably famous. They were praised by Vasari and have recently been the subject of numerous dissertations, articles, and monographs.<sup>26</sup> While these studies have each contributed to a deeper understanding

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<sup>25</sup> The history of the Cappella has been outlined in nearly every significant study. Most recently, Sara Nair James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto: Liturgy, Poetry and a Vision of the End-time* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003). See also Edwin Hull and Horst Uhr, "Patrons and Painter in Quest of an Iconographic Program: The Case of the Signorelli Frescoes in Orvieto," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 55:1 (1992), 35-56.

<sup>26</sup> Among recent studies and publications are Rose Marie San Juan, "The Illustrious Poets in Signorelli's Frescoes for the Cappella Nuova of Orvieto Cathedral," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 52 (1989), 71-84; Edwin Hull and Horst Uhr, "Patrons and Painter in Quest of an Iconographic Program," Dugald McLellan, "Luca Signorelli's Last Judgment Fresco Cycle at Orvieto: An Interpretation of the Fears and Hopes of the Commune and the People of Orvieto at a Time of Reckoning" Ph.D. diss., University of Melbourne, 1992; Guisti Testa, ed., *La Cappella Nova o di San Brizio nel Duomo di Orvieto* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1996); Jonathan Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist: Luca Signorelli's Orvieto Frescoes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Sara Nair James, "Poetic Theology in Signorelli's Cappella Nuova at Orvieto" Ph.D. diss. University of Virginia, 1994; Sara Nair James, "Penance and Redemption: The Role of the Roman Liturgy in Luca Signorelli's Frescoes at Orvieto," *Artibus et Historiae* 22: 44 (2001), 119-47; Creighton Gilbert, *How Fra Angelico and*



of the Cappella Nova and its decorative programs, the particular meaning of the socle decoration has remained problematic and obscured to scholarly comprehension, even despite specific attempts to unveil and elucidate its significance. Among these, Sara Nair James, in a new (2003) publication that reworked her 1994 dissertation, came exceedingly close to understanding the importance of allegorical interpretation to the socle decoration.<sup>27</sup> Even though this is to be highly commended on various counts, in this work, Nair, as others before her, did not fully realize the typological and anagogical significance of Signorelli's mythologically-themed medallions. Thus, to date, no scholar has fully recognized the degree to which the classical scenes represented in the medallions of the socle of the Cappella Nova relate to and represent Christian themes of penance and particular judgment and, in this particular context, convey the Christian belief that the torments visited on good souls in Purgatory are alleviated through the prayers and actions of the living, even those faithful who visit the Cappella Nova in Orvieto.

Though the figures and scenes that decorate the vault and lunettes of the Cappella Nova are relatively straightforward in iconography and representation—an expanded representation of the Last Judgment and certain Apocalyptic themes which surround that event—the decoration of the socle is unique in the history of Italian Renaissance art and particular to the program of the Cappella. Here, on the lowest register of the walls, Signorelli and his team painted portraits of nine authors from the classical and contemporary periods—eight are visible today, though one of these is severely damaged;

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*Signorelli Saw the End of the World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); and James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*.

<sup>27</sup> James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*.

the ninth was destroyed in 1715 when a large altarpiece was added to the Cappella.<sup>28</sup> The figures are portrayed bust-length in perspectival frames, as if seated in a space beyond the surface of the wall and seen through round or rectangular openings cut into the wall. These figures act and react as if they exist properly in the space of the chapel—though three are absorbed in books or scrolls, the others look out of their frames as if aware of the decoration that surrounds them, and two appear even to lean out beyond the wall surface to better view the frescoes above. Excepting only the two figures on the entry wall, each figure has a book, books, or a scroll open before them, held or resting on the shelf that is formed by the lowest edge of the surrounding frame. Each figure is intimately connected to his accompanying volume. Their figures touch the books, turn pages, mark places in their texts with their fingers as they read or if they turn their eyes to look away from what they had been reading. One figure, the only one who can be identified with any degree of certainty, reads from one open book, propped up against two closed volumes, even as he rests one hand on another text open before him. (Figure 30) This is Dante, with his characteristic profile, red gown and cap, and poet's crown of laurel. Two of his companions, poets also, are similarly crowned with laurel wreathes, and a third wears bay leaves in his youthful curls. Though they are distinct in presentation, none of the poets of the socle, i.e. none but Dante, is as readily identified. There are no identifying inscriptions, no titles on the books that they read. If some may be plausibly identified as the authors of the works which provide the subjects of the scenes which surround them, in grisaille monochrome, in medallions that are also framed against the wall of the socle, some degree or uncertainty and scholarly debate will nonetheless remain.

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<sup>28</sup> James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*, 87; and Gilbert, *How Fra Angelico and Signorelli Saw*, 98-99, 104-5.

The framed medallions constitute a second, or perhaps a third cycle of decoration to the socle of the Cappella, joining the series of authors and the grotesque tendrils that fill the surface of the wall around and between them. On the side walls of the Cappella, to the east and west, the pattern is to surround each of the author portraits with four medallions—above, below, and to either side. This pattern is interrupted in two instances by the architecture of the Cappella, where the frames of the smaller burial chapels, the Cappellina della Magdalena to the east and the Cappellina della Pietà to the west, cut through the lower medallions and the author portraits and eclipse what would be one of the side medallions, in each case. (See figure 40) The two authors of the entry wall, to the north, are not accompanied by medallions, but the fictive architecture of the altar wall opposite, to the south, is decorated with grisaille medallions even where there are no authors. If the arrangement is difficult to describe, it follows a logical composition relating to the architecture and space of the Cappella and is visually comprehensible, even aesthetically pleasing.

Many, though not all, of the scenes depicted in the grisaille medallions have been plausibly identified. Those surrounding Dante, on the east wall immediately to the right of the Cappellina della Magdalena and beneath the lunette in which is painted the *Crowning of the Elect*, depict scenes from his *Purgatorio*. (Figure 30) This same source provides the subjects of the medallions surrounding Dante's neighbor poet farther to the right (Figure 31), who also sits beneath the *Crowning of the Elect*—the division of the wall places two poets beneath each lunette, where the wall is not interrupted by burial *cappelline*. Dante's neighbor has been variously identified by scholars as Statius, Virgil, or St. John the Evangelist, according to the various scholarly readings of the Cappella and its decoration.<sup>29</sup> The series of scenes from *Purgatorio* continues on the south wall, in

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<sup>29</sup> Tom Henry and Laurence Kanter, *Luca Signorelli: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), 204. For St. John, see San Juan, "Illustrious Poets," 83.

three medallions that decorate a space between two fictive piers that is not wide enough to accommodate a framed poet. (Figure 32) The series of scenes from *Purgatorio*—eleven medallions with their subjects drawn from the first eleven cantos of that poem, one from each canto—is the most extensive series from a single source in the socle. Furthermore, it takes a privileged position in relation to the greater program of decoration in the Cappella Nova. These scenes fill the space beneath the Blessed and the Elect, at the right hand of Christ, pictured in Judgment in the vault above.

Opposite Dante and the series of medallions drawn from *Purgatorio* are the two other laurel-crowned poets, surrounded each by scenes taken from classical mythology. Directly opposite Dante, and thus to the immediate left of the Cappellina della Pietà and beneath the lunette in which is depicted the *Torture of the Damned*, the poet sits in the midst of scenes depicting Aeneas and the Cumaean Sibyl, Hercules restraining Cerberus and the release of Theseus, Orpheus before Plato and Persephone, and Orpheus with Eurydice. (Figure 33) The poet painted here has most commonly been identified as Virgil.<sup>30</sup> His neighboring poet, closer to the altar wall, is surrounded with scenes taken from the abduction of Persephone. (Figure 34) Thus, Persephone appears with Diana, Minerva, and Venus in the uppermost medallion; she is taken by Pluto in the scene to the right; Ceres hunts for her daughter in the left medallion; Pluto sinks into the pool of Cyan below.<sup>31</sup> The poet surrounded by these medallions has been traditionally identified as Ovid, who described the rape of Persephone in his *Metamorphoses*, though it has been noted that the story is described in other sources, and, accordingly, the poet has

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<sup>30</sup> Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 204.

<sup>31</sup> Henry and Kanter, following earlier identification, described this scene as Pluto surveying Mount Aetna. Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 201. Sara Nair James identified this as Pluto sinking into the Pool of Cyane and claimed a derivation from an illustration in the *Ouidio Methamorphoseos vulgare*, though she did not provide a figure as support. James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*, 115, 168 n. 33.

alternately been alternately been identified as Claudian, the author of one such text, the *De Raptu Proserpinae*.<sup>32</sup>

Just as the scenes from *Purgatorio* fill one bay of the east wall and spill over onto the east side of the altar wall to the south, the scenes drawn from mythological sources fill the southern bay of the west wall and continue on the west side of the altar wall, adjacent. There, three additional scenes from the *Metamorphosis*—a scene of punishment visited on mortals by demons, the rescue of Andromeda by Perseus, and Phineus at the wedding of Perseus and Andromeda—are painted in the narrow space provided.<sup>33</sup> (Figure 35) The continuity of subjects from the *Metamorphosis* supports the identification of Ovid as the author portrayed in the nearest portrait, at the south end of the west wall.

The scenes drawn from Dante's *Purgatorio* and from various works of classical mythology are relatively easy to identify. Dante is readily recognized, both in his author portrait and as a figure in the grisaille medallions that take their subject from his work. Though some of the mythological subjects are obscure and have been variously interpreted by scholars, the greater number of scenes represent well known characters and events and follow established artistic conventions. This is the case with Perseus rescuing Andromeda, Persephone carried to Hades by Pluto, with Ceres on her serpent-drawn chariot in pursuit, and Orpheus, *lira da braccio* in hand, whose beloved Eurydice is pulled from him by a host of hideous demons. Hercules also will be recognized, restraining three-headed Cerebus as Theseus is released from Hades, slaying the centaur Nessus, and, in a series of even smaller medallions that alternates with the scenes from *Purgatorio* surrounding Statius / Virgil, performing four of his famous labors. (See

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<sup>32</sup> James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*, 88; Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 204. Creighton Gilbert proposed Claudian, who is the author of *De Raptu Proserpinae*: Gilbert, *How Fra Angelico and Signorelli Saw*, 93-94,

<sup>33</sup> San Juan, "Illustrious Poets," 73.

Figure 33) The remaining medallions in the Cappella, however, are more obscure in subject and source. These, and the poets whose portraits they surround, have been variously interpreted and explained by those scholars who have studied the socle. The medallions on the altar wall, of which the death of Nessus is one, appear to celebrate virtue and condemn vice: to the left of the altar Charity vanquishes Envy and Chastity stands triumphant. (Figure 36) A scene to the right, in which a bound figure is held and beaten by three others, has been interpreted both as an allegorical representation of Blasphemy punished and as a scene of Deiphobus beaten in the Underworld, as witnessed by Aeneas.<sup>34</sup> (Figure 37) Indeed, this scene, like others to the north end of the Cappella, is somewhat ambiguous in subject.

The five medallions that remain visible—one has been obscured by a later grave marker—around the two author portraits on the east and west walls to the north of the *cappelline* are similarly ambiguous. Like the scene of a figure beaten on the altar wall, these grisailles depict figures bound, tortured, mercilessly set upon by others, or brought captive to judgment. Some have been identified as scenes from the Iliad surrounding a portrait of Homer, or as scenes from the rule of Anthony surrounding a portrait of Cicero.<sup>35</sup> (Figure 38) The opposite figure, on the west wall, has traditionally been identified as Lucan, accompanied by representations of the atrocities committed under the

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<sup>34</sup> Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 204. For Deiphobus: James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*, 122-23.

<sup>35</sup> Luzi proposed the figure as Homer: Ludovico Luzi, *Il Duomo di Orvieto descritto e illustrato* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1866). For Cicero, see Riess, *Renaissance Antichrist*, 123-27. Henry and Kanter list, as proposed identifications: Cicero, Statius, Sallust, and Homer. Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 203.

reign of Caesar and described in that author's *Pharsalia*.<sup>36</sup> (Figure 39) This identification, of course, has been questioned in subsequent scholarship.<sup>37</sup>

The program of the socle, therefore, appears to be comprised of distinct sections or categories of subjects. In the east and southeast are a series of scenes that take their subjects from Dante's *Purgatorio*. Opposite, on the west wall and to the right side of the south wall, are scenes that are readily recognizable as classical in subject, drawn from classical mythology. These two categories of subject may have found an easy transition on the south wall, in the poet and surrounding medallions that were, regrettably, lost to view in the 18th century. The program of poets is broken by two burial chapels, opposite each other on the east and west walls. The east *cappellina*, dedicated to Mary Magdalene, was originally decorated with a grisaille scene of the *Resurrection of Lazarus* and roundels depicting Mary Magdalene and her sister, Martha. The west *cappellina* still displays a *Pietà with Saints Mary Magdalene, Faustino, and Pietro Parenzo* and roundels depicting the martyrdom of the latter two saints, to whom the *cappellina* is dedicated. (Figure 40) The series of poets and grisailles resumes to the north of these two *cappelline* with the third category of subjects: scenes of punishment and torture that may relate to events from classical history or events described in civic commentary from that era. Finally, the north wall, itself, displays two author portraits, one to either side of the entrance into the Cappella. One of the north wall poets is so obscured by damage as to be impossible to identify. (Figure 41) The other has been called Empedocles, though this derives not from any mark or sign on the figure or in his surroundings, but from one

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<sup>36</sup> Luzi called him Lucan. Riess elaborated on the rule of Caesar. Riess, *Renaissance Antichrist*, 129-30.

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert, *How Fra Angelico and Signorelli Saw*, 142-45.

possible interpretation of the larger program.<sup>38</sup> (Figure 42) Indeed, any understanding of the socle of the Cappella Nova rests on the interpretation of figures and scenes and of how they relate, both to each other and to the Apocalyptic events that are depicted above. It is essential, therefore, to properly assess contemporary Renaissance beliefs and perceptions regarding the nature and interpretation of classical mythology and its relation to Christian subject and doctrine and to place the program of the socle, accordingly, in relation to the development of allegorical interpretation in the Renaissance period.

The decoration of the socle of the Cappella Nova has been thought to relate to the scenes and subjects depicted in the frescoes above, though there has been no consensus on the precise manner in which this is achieved. Certain authors have perceived or recognized a degree of typology in the juxtaposition of scenes, noting a similarity of theme between the mythological subjects and the actions and events depicted above, but the particular nature of this relationship has not been properly understood. Scholars have sensed, and sought to resolve, a tension between the representation of classical authors and mythological subjects, on the one hand, and the Christian subjects and setting, on the other. Thus, Rose Marie San Juan, in a dedicated study of the socle decoration, attempted to “justify” the presence of pagan authors in a religious context and proposed that their writings, perceived as prophetic visions and prefigurations of the Last Judgment, were included in the decorative program of the Cappella in order to give credibility to the religious narrative of the Apocalypse by providing a foundation of those textual sources championed by the humanists.<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Riess, who studied the Cappella with a particular focus on the figure of the Antichrist, interpreted the medallions as representing

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<sup>38</sup> Luzi believed that the poets are those described by Dante as being in Limbo. Luzi, *Il Duomo di Orvieto*.

<sup>39</sup> San Juan, “Illustrious Poets,” 77, 84.



the savagery of the Earthly City, and viewed the poets as at once celebrated and condemned, as errant in being politically engaged, but also praiseworthy for writing of matters that are important to Christians, even prefiguring or paralleling Christian themes in their subjects.<sup>40</sup> Riess outlined some of these parallels, calling Hercules a “figure” for Michael and Theseus, as a defender of the moral law, a “figure for the leadership of the Church.”<sup>41</sup> Riess stopped short of naming this relationship as typology, however, and presented the figures from classical mythology as models of moral behavior, rather than true types to their Christian counterparts.

The same practice limits Sara Nair James’ otherwise exceptional study of the socle figures in the Cappella Nova. James placed the series of authors in the context of the Renaissance humanist view that certain classical poets were among the earliest theologians—the *prisci theologii*—to have a “correct” view of what was perceived to be an objective, Christian Truth. James also discussed the mythological scenes as typological, described the development of allegorical interpretation in the Renaissance, and attempted a reading of Signorelli’s frescoes according to a fourfold system including literal, moral, typological, and anagogical degrees.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, however, James ultimately interpreted the program of the Cappella Nova according to a more traditional view of the significance of classical mythology, its relationship to Christian subjects and sources, and the degrees of allegorical meaning perceived in each. James appropriately identified the scenes which are to be understood according to the literal level of meaning as those of the upper walls and vault—the events from the Apocalypse and Last Judgment. Though she described them separately, James conflated the second and third degrees of meaning—

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<sup>40</sup> Riess, *Renaissance Antichrist*, 131, 127-28.

<sup>41</sup> Riess, *Renaissance Antichrist*, 132.

<sup>42</sup> James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*, 138-43.

moral and typological allegory—and identified the classical subjects represented in the Cappella Nova as moral exemplars for Christian virtue. Finally, James reserved the anagogical or mystical level of allegory for the Christian scenes in the vaults, where, she claimed, truth is revealed “in the form of liturgical texts and the heavenly hosts.”<sup>43</sup> Though James, alone, recognized the Renaissance development of allegorical interpretation as a significant context within which the fresco cycle of the Cappella Nova was constructed and within which the iconographic program will be understood, ultimately she fell back on a pre-Renaissance mode of interpretation in attempting to determine the significance of the classical subjects that are integrated into the decoration of the socle. James viewed the heroes and deities of classical mythology as moral exemplars, a role that they play in medieval interpretation and in the *Ovide moralisée*, the text that she saw as the source for the iconography and meaning of the classical scenes that decorate the socle.

Unfortunately, the interpretations of the socle decoration offered to date are not plausible, either because they invert the relative authority of the pagan and Christian traditions or because they fail to provide a definitive reason why scenes from the classical tradition were a necessary inclusion in the decoration of the chapel. It has been well established that the classical authors and even the mythological subjects depicted in the grisaille panels could have been interpreted for Christian content, that Renaissance humanists and philosophers professed a belief that certain aspects of Christian Truth were known by philosophers and poets even in the period before Christ and that this belief may have factored in to the reasons for including the poets in the Cappella Nova decoration. This belief, however, does not provide the necessity of including the pagan poets or the mythological scenes, i.e. the reason why these figures and scenes were chosen, and

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<sup>43</sup> James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*, 142-43.

particularly the reason why these figures and scenes were chosen over Judeo-Christian figures and scenes which, in other contexts and in other iconographic programs, represent the same subjects or themes that are proposed in the studies by San Juan, Riess, and James. Why, in the context of the Cappella Nova, would pagan authors replace Old Testament prophets—Daniel and Ezekiel, for example, who also professed and described their Apocalyptic visions—as an authority on the events of the Second Coming? Why would pagan heroes replace Hebrew heroes—David, Job, or Judith—as moral exemplars or abstract personifications—Faith, Hope, Charity, and those others represented in the socle of the Arena Chapel in Padua—as representations of model virtues? These subjects and themes are not, by necessity, represented through classical references. A certain tension between the classical elements of the decoration and the Christian context and significance of the iconographic program remains inherent in any scholarly interpretation that simply replaces Judeo-Christian elements with classical figures and scenes, without making that exchange necessary.

The classical elements of the Cappella Nova decoration, their relation to the Christian subjects depicted in the greater program of decoration, and the necessity of their inclusion in this program, will be properly understood only when the program is viewed according to a Renaissance mode of interpretation. It is necessary to recall, *a priori*, that the Cappella Nova was, above all, a Christian space, and that the architects of the iconographic program of vault, wall, and socle were Christian and would have believed in the authority of the Biblical narrative over any supporting contribution that could have been made on the authority of classical poetry. It is essentially anachronistic to Christian belief to argue, as in San Juan's reading of the Cappella, that the events described in the last book of the Bible needed support from classical mythology. The scenes of the Apocalypse, painted on the vault and on the walls above, are not more acceptable or authoritative to the Christian mind when glossed by the classical subjects or classical

authors painted below. Thus, while there was likely a relationship of the scenes on the socle to the scenes portrayed above, the mythological narrative did not support or justify the narrative of the Biblical book of Revelation. The mythological scenes do relate, however, in both a typological and an analogical manner to the other subjects depicted on the socle, to the scenes from Dante's *Purgatorio*. These scenes, or more particularly the Christian beliefs and developing doctrine that they present and signify, did not rest on the unerring authority of the Biblical narrative and could, in turn, be glossed and supported by the mythological subjects that were their types. Furthermore, the mythological subjects are here presented not only as types for Christian subjects, but, on the authority of the perception that the classical authors were heirs to Christian Truth, the mythological scenes can be understood for their analogical significance and may contribute directly to the understanding of Christian doctrine. Because these mythological scenes, in their perceived analogical meaning, expound on the developing doctrine of Purgatory, and because neither the narrative of the Old Testament nor the doctrine and parable of the New Testament explicitly justifies or glosses the belief in Purgatory, the mythological elements of the Cappella Nova are a necessary component and contribute to its iconographic program in ways that scenes from the Bible could not.

Though the doctrine of Purgatory was not officially codified until the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth-century, the belief in Purgatory was an essential component of Western Church dogma for centuries before.<sup>44</sup> The existence and nature of Purgatory was discussed and debated at the Councils of Lyon in 1274 and

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<sup>44</sup> Curiously, Riess, who otherwise exhibited a sensitivity to the doctrine and importance of Purgatory, maintained that Purgatory did not feature in Christian dogma at the time of the decoration of the Cappella Nova (Riess, *Renaissance Antichrist*, 42) and that the doctrine of Purgatory was not officially sanctioned until the middle of the sixteenth-century (Riess, *Luca Signorelli: The San Brizio Chapel, Orvieto* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 101), an apparent reference to the Council of Trent.

Ferrara in 1438 and defended by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*.<sup>45</sup> The idea and nature of Purgatory resisted acceptance and definition in certain arenas, most notably in the Eastern Church, largely because the belief and doctrine of Purgatory were founded on the interpretation of Biblical passages rather than any direct Biblical reference to that realm. The efficacy of prayer for the dead is implied in a portion of the second book of Maccabees (12: 41-46), and the forgiveness of sins even after death is similarly implicit in a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (12: 31-32),<sup>46</sup> yet Purgatory, as a place, is neither named nor described in Bible text. Nonetheless, Purgatory existed in popular imagination and developed over the centuries in official Church theology as a place where good souls go immediately after death to be subjected to the refining fire of Hell as a means of atonement for sins that were not grievous enough to condemn the offending body to an eternity of torment. What is more, one essential component of the belief and doctrine of Purgatory described the ability of the living to alleviate the torment of those good souls and even to win their release through prayer and sacrament. Thus Thomas Aquinas interpreted the words of Gregory of Nyssa as support for the efficacy of prayer over the sins of the dead:

Hence Gregory of Nyssa, after the words quoted above, adds: “This we preach, holding to the teaching of truth, and this is our belief; this the

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<sup>45</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Purgatory.” On the Councils of Ferrara and Florence, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Florence, Council of.” See also Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 41, 284-88, and on 289: “Purgatory triumphed in the thirteenth century both in theology and in dogma. Doubts about its existence were silenced: it became a truth of faith and of the Church. In one form or another, concretely or in varying degrees of abstraction, it was accepted as a place. It took on an official character.... [I]t was controlled by the theologians and the Church hierarchy, who refused to allow the imagination of the faithful to run riot.”

<sup>46</sup> The passage from II Maccabees was cited by Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, supp., App. 2:1 in support of the doctrine of Purgatory. See also Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 41-42.

Universal Church holds, by praying for the dead that they may be loosed from sins.” This cannot be understood except as referring to Purgatory: and whosoever resists the authority of the Church, incurs the note of heresy.<sup>47</sup>

This also was affirmed in the mid-sixteenth-century by the Council of Trent, in the decrees of the twenty-fifth session: “[T]hat there is a purgatory, and that the souls detained there are helped by the prayers of the faithful, and especially by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar.”<sup>48</sup>

The program of the socle of the Cappella Nova, conceived as a whole, confirms the existence and efficacy of Purgatory and places that realm and the beliefs pertaining to it in relation to the Last Judgment portrayed in the frescoes above.<sup>49</sup> This program is most apparent in the portrait of Dante and in the scenes that surround him and his neighbor poet. Here the architects of the iconography presented a series of scenes from Dante’s work, but drew from *Purgatorio* alone. Neither Heaven nor Hell is represented, though in his *Divine Comedy* Dante traveled to and described those places, also. In the Cappella Nova, the subject, source, and position of the *Purgatorio* medallions profess a belief in Purgatory, draw from Dante’s narrative description of that realm and rest on his authority as a poet / theologian, and locate that place—Purgatory itself—on the side of the Blessed, who may need refining through penitential labor before their resurrection into

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<sup>47</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, supp. App. 2:1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947-1948), 3:3022.

<sup>48</sup> Catholic Church, *The Church Teaches*, 352.

<sup>49</sup> Riess did explore the doctrine of Purgatory and relate various aspects, including the efficacy of prayer, to the socle decoration and to the frescoes above. However, he limited his interpretation of the relevance of Purgatory to the medallions that depict scenes from Dante’s *Purgatorio* and did not recognize that these things are signified also in the mythological subjects. Riess, *Renaissance Antichrist*, 42-45.

Heaven.<sup>50</sup> The extra-Biblical subject has a proper place in the Cappella Nova and in relation to the events described in the Bible and painted above, precisely because Purgatory is not described in the Bible. There was, quite simply, no other authoritative source for narrative scenes depicting the landscape and population of the Third Realm. For this same reason, the scenes and subjects of the opposite wall are included in the program of the socle. Despite their unorthodox origin in classical poetry, these mythological-themed grisailles are necessary in relation to the program of the socle and in relation to the greater iconographic cycle of the Cappella Nova, for they make clear the efficacy of prayer in redeeming the souls in Purgatory, which practice or belief was, again, not described in the Bible, nor in Dante's *Comedia*, and therefore not otherwise able to be represented in narrative form.

The relationship between the mythological scenes and the surrounding decoration of the Cappella Nova is not as simple or direct as that of the *Purgatorio* medallions. The *Purgatorio* scenes are positioned to the right-hand of God, enthroned in Judgment on the vault above, and immediately to the right of the *Cappellina della Magdalena*—the burial chapel dedicated to a penitential saint, Mary Magdalene. These scenes show both the necessity of penitence and the destination of all good souls in the time between their death and eventual ascent into Heaven. Even the particular subjects represented—the torture of souls in Purgatory rather than Dante's ascent up Purgatory's mountain toward Heaven—are relevant in this context. These scenes relate directly to the subject pictured in

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<sup>50</sup> Riess noted the relationship of the *Purgatorio* scenes and the *Coronation of the Blessed* fresco, and even referred to the efficacy of prayer in releasing the souls in Purgatory, who then would rise to the Blessed. However, Riess did not make explicit the relationship between the grisaille medallions and the release from Purgatory through the prayers of the living—he relied on a vague reading of Le Goff in claiming that the first eleven cantos “proclaim the importance of prayer among the living”—and did not view the classical subjects as typologically parallel to the scenes from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Riess, *Renaissance Antichrist*, 44-45.

the lunette above—the good souls of Purgatory are essentially the same as the Blessed who assemble higher on the wall. This is not the case with the pagan scenes on the wall opposite. Though Hades is, admittedly, the setting of the mythological subjects represented on the western wall of the Cappella, these scenes do not simply represent those souls who will end in Hell. Such a representation could more properly be represented either through Biblical subjects—the story of Lazarus and Dives, for example—or with scenes drawn from Dante’s *Inferno*, perhaps following the model of Nardo di Cione’s layered depiction of Hell in the Cappella Strozzi of Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Furthermore, if logic alone does not dictate that Christian sources would have been chosen, as elsewhere in the chapel, to represent the Christian Hell, the particular subjects and themes represented in the mythological scenes show that this is not their intended message, not the significance of their placement, and not their contribution to the greater iconographic program of the chapel.

With the sole exception of the scenes from the myth of Perseus, the subjects depicted in the mythological-themed grisaille medallions center around figures who descend into Hades, willingly or unwillingly, and either win their own return to earth or attempt to bring back a beloved friend or spouse who already in that afterlife. Thus, Aeneas is brought to the mouth of Hades by the Cumaean Sibyl and descends to witness the dead being flogged as they confess their sins. Persephone is taken to Hades by Pluto, but her distraught mother, Ceres, petitions Jupiter and wins her daughter’s release. Hercules, who descends into Hades to rescue Theseus and Pirithous, brings the former back to earth. Orpheus enters Hades and plays for Pluto and Persephone in a doomed attempt to bring back his beloved Eurydice. Even Perseus, though he does not enter Hades, performs an act of salvation in releasing Andromeda from imprisonment and



certain death on the rock to which she was bound.<sup>51</sup> These are not simply scenes of Hades, and they do relatively little to gloss the Christian Hell, with its many layers and its vast and varied population. Rather, these are all scenes in which the action and intervention of a living figure provides release for one who is already in the afterlife. In this respect, these scenes parallel one essential component of the Renaissance Christian belief in Purgatory: that the actions and prayers of the living can lessen the suffering of souls in Purgatory and even win their release.<sup>52</sup> This particular aspect of the developing doctrine of Purgatory is not explicit in the scenes from Dante's *Purgatorio*, but is represented on the wall opposite, in the allegorical meaning of the scenes from classical mythology. The figures portrayed here, and Aeneas in particular, are types both for Dante and for Lazarus, whose return from the afterlife was depicted on the back wall of the *Cappellina della Magdalena*, though alterations to that space have since destroyed that New Testament scene.<sup>53</sup>

The mythological scenes may also be seen to function on the level of anagogical significance—that is, they do not only reveal, through juxtaposition, the meaning that is inherent in other stories that are typological parallels, but they reveal the very mysteries of the Christian faith directly in and of themselves. Though their literal significance is entirely meaningless in a Christian context, these scenes gloss the Christian belief in

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<sup>51</sup> San Juan and James, both, cited the various classical source texts from which these subject ultimately derive. San Juan, "Illustrious Poets;" James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*. Because the mythological subjects represented are drawn from numerous sources and certain subjects are recounted or described in multiple versions by various authors from various periods and/or represented in works of art available to Signorelli and/or his patrons, I have chosen not to reproduce the citations given by other scholars, in part to avoid the impression of a direct relationship between Signorelli's medallions and specific classical sources.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supp., App. 2: on Purgatory.

<sup>53</sup> James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*, 115.

Purgatory as examples of the efficacy of the actions of the living on the state of souls in the afterlife. Here, in the anagogical significance of carefully selected episodes from classical mythology, the narrative of classical mythology had a greater relevance for the doctrine of Purgatory than any Judeo-Christian narrative, excepting only the raising of Lazarus, which was depicted elsewhere in the decoration of the socle.<sup>54</sup> In the context of the iconographic program which decorates the Cappella Nova, the scenes from Dante's *Purgatorio* posit the very existence of that realm and show it to be a place of torment and the necessary refining of souls through just punishment. The scenes from classical mythology further gloss the Church's views on Purgatory and reveal the role that the living can play—that through their actions the souls of their loved ones can be spared torture and punishment and even released into a blessed existence above. This is the allegorical message of the scenes from classical mythology, their essential contribution to the socle and to the larger program of decoration, and the very reason for their inclusion in that program—that the message they convey can best or only be conveyed through their narrative, not from any cycle or series provided in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

This study, which is primarily concerned with the Renaissance perception of allegorical meaning in Christian and classical subjects, has focused on the portions of the socle that more readily identified as either Christian or classical. The remaining scenes also fall into place within the iconographic program that is here proposed. The grisaille

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<sup>54</sup> II Maccabees, 12:42-46, in which the Jews under Judah Maccabeus pray and sacrifice for the sins of their dead, has frequently been cited in support of the doctrines of Purgatory. If this event does not now appear in the decoration of the socle, one can not entirely rule out the possibility that it originally appeared on the portion of the wall that is now hidden by the chapel altarpiece—this panel was described as a poet surrounded by “souls tormented by punishments, scourges, and others” (Gilbert, *How Fra Angelico and Signorelli Saw*, 104). Furthermore, one may note that the dead in this story were slain at God's will for their sins, which aspect of the story could have been not only troublesome but out of place in the message of the Cappella Nova.

scenes that are painted on the north side of the Cappella quite clearly depict scenes of judgment and torture. In one scene, a figure is bound and brought captive before a judging authority. In others, figures are held and beaten without mercy. Whether these scenes illustrate passages from Virgil's *Aeneid* or derive from civic texts by Cicero or Lucan, they describe also the tortures visited upon souls in Purgatory, and thus may be seen as types from classical literature or from Ancient history.

Thus, the iconographic program that decorates the socle of the Cappella Nova will be understood in relation to contemporary beliefs regarding the allegorical interpretation of extra-Biblical literature. The mythological subjects depicted on the socle convey meaning on the level of typological and anagogical allegory and in this way contribute to a program that is of immediate or contemporary significance to the viewer and complementary to the scenes from the Apocalypse depicted above. The frescoes of the upper walls and vault present the End of Days—the Last Judgment and its effects. The frescoes of the socle present the effects of the Particular Judgment, which is visited on souls at their death and determines whether they will enter into Purgatory or descend directly into Hell.<sup>55</sup> In the frescoes of the socle, the existence and nature of Purgatory is described in scenes from Dante's *Purgatorio*, and the efficacy of prayer or sacrifice in relieving the suffering of the dead is illustrated in scenes from classical mythology.

As glosses on the Renaissance doctrine of Purgatory, the classical scenes painted on the socle have a relevance, also, in relation to the actual use of the Cappella Nova. The Apocalyptic scenes above instilled the righteous fear of God and Judgment in the Renaissance Christian observer, together with hope for a resurrection among the Blessed, though that time of judgment and resurrection remained in the uncertain future. If that

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<sup>55</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, s.v. "Judgment, Divine (in Theology)."

End of Days was, perhaps, thought near when the Cappella Nova decoration was begun in 1449, the half-millennium had passed by the time the socle decoration was begun. It may be more than coincidence that the subjects represented in the socle speak not to the ultimate future, but to the importance of contemporary action, to the effect of the very action and prayer that the observer was to undertake in that space. Prayer and participation in the liturgical service saved the participant ultimately from the Hell that Signorelli painted on the west wall of the Cappella. Prayer and participation could also save those beloved to the participant from the torture and torment that was being visited upon their souls at the very moment in which the observer turned his or her eyes to the mythological scenes painted lower on that same wall. Other eyes may have found in those same scenes an entirely different message—it is Sara Nair James' argument that the intellectual elite of Orvieto would have recognized the virtues that are represented by Aeneas, Hercules, Perseus, and others.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, it is the particular nature of Renaissance interpretation to perceive a polysemitaity in the allegorical meaning of subjects, both Biblical and classical. These same scenes may have held a moral significance in the mind of the Renaissance observer, or may have been interpreted on such a level, in the Renaissance just as today. It is on the deeper levels of typological allegory and even anagogical allegory, however, that these scenes relate directly to the Christian doctrines that define the message of the socle and place it in relation to the events portrayed above.

It is also in its reliance on the perceived typological and anagogical significance of classical subjects that the Cappella Nova program demonstrates a characteristically Renaissance response to classical mythology and, correspondingly, signals its place in the Renaissance development of allegorical interpretation. The process of expanding the

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<sup>56</sup> James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto*, 90, 118-27.

perceived levels of allegorical significance in extra-Biblical sources that was begun in early Trecento literature and manifest in the typological juxtapositions of elements in Trecento mural decoration reaches perhaps no greater height than the decoration of the Cappella Nova, where classical subjects are included in the iconographic program in order to reveal mysteries of the Christian faith through their typological and anagogical significance. The full range of the development of allegorical interpretation can thus be bound, on either end, by the examples of the Arena Chapel, Padua, and the Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral, and an intermediate step in that development signified by the change in the perceived scope of typological interpretation from decoration of the Arena Chapel to the decoration of the Chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella, Florence. If the gulf between the decoration of the Chapterhouse and the Cappella Nova is considerable, both conceptually and chronologically, nevertheless these two programs are worthy of comparison, because both are complex mural programs, variously interpreted in art historical scholarship, which originally constructed and ultimately reveal their meaning in relation to the developing perception of allegorical interpretation. The lacuna between these two programs may be filled, at least in part, with other works of Renaissance art that originally constructed and will ultimately reveal their meaning in relation to the developing perception of allegorical interpretation—specifically with certain freestanding works of art, rather than mural decoration, which depend on the perceived typology of classical and Judeo-Christian subjects. This is the subject of the chapter which follows.



Figure 5 – Typological Image of the *Madonna and Child Enthroned* from the Legendarium Cisterciennse (Dijon, bib. Mun. Ms 641)



Figure 6 – Michelangelo, *Pietà*, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican, Rome



Figure 7 – View of the Arena Chapel, Padua, from the West toward the Altar Wall





Figure 8 – Giotto (or school of), *The Circumcision of the son of Abraham*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 9 – Giotto (or school of), *Moses Striking the Rock*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 10 – Giotto (or school of), *The Creation of Adam*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 11 – Giotto (or school of), *Elisha Entering Jericho*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 12 - Giotto (or school of), *The Archangel Michael Triumphant*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua

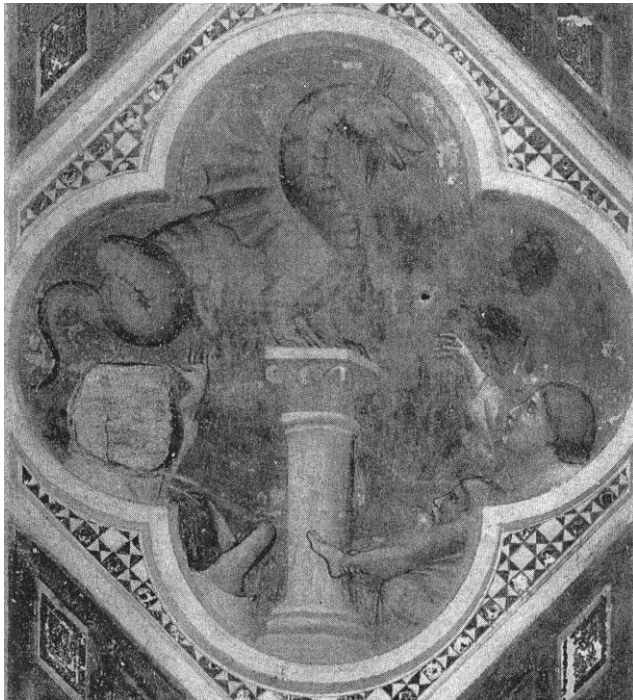


Figure 13 – Giotto (or school of), *Moses and the Brazen Serpent*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 14 – Giotto (or school of), *Jonah Swallowed by a Fish*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 15 – Giotto (or school of), *Elisha Assumed Into Heaven*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 16 – Giotto (or school of), *God Appearing to Ezekiel*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 17 – Giotto (or school of), *A Lion Breathing Life Into His Stillborn Cubs*, medallion from the Arena Chapel, Padua



Figure 18 – Detail of the north wall of the Arena Chapel, Padua, showing the juxtaposition of medallions with scenes from the Old Testament and narrative panels with scenes from the New Testament



Figure 19 Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Passion Cycle*, north wall, Chapterhouse, Santa Maria Novella

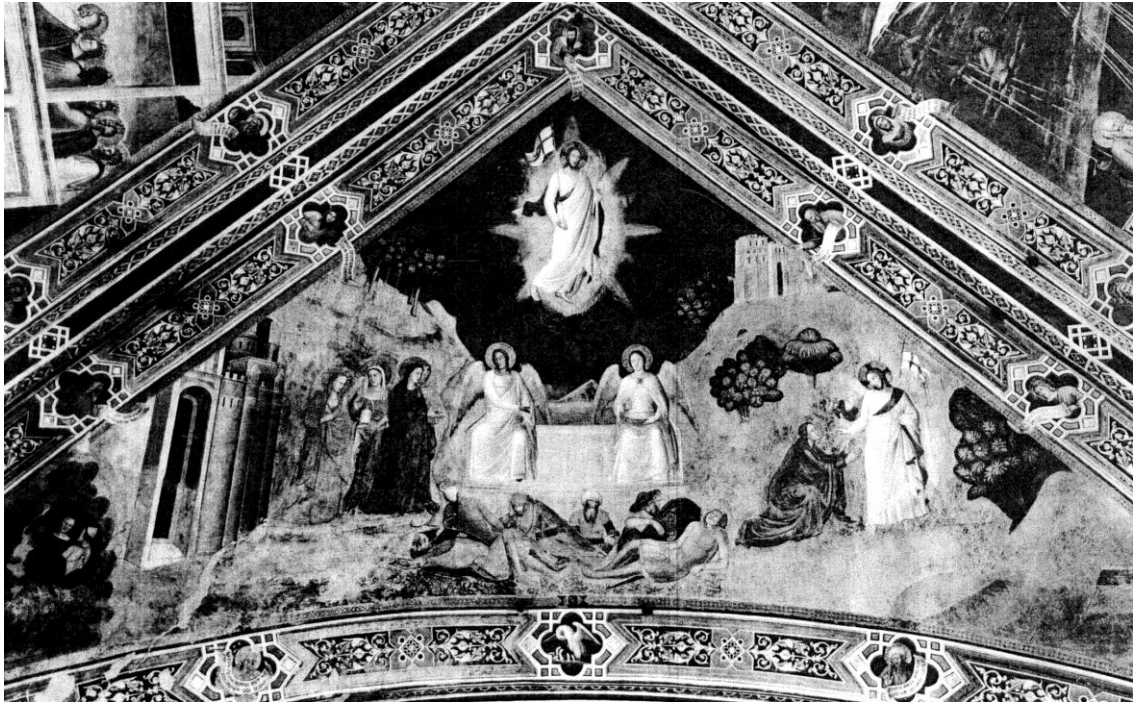


Figure 20 - Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Resurrection and Noli Me Tangere*, vault quadrant over the north wall, Chapterhouse, Santa Maria Novella





Figure 21 - Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Ascension*, vault quadrant over the south wall, Chapterhouse, Santa Maria Novella



Figure 22 – Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Via Veritatis*, east wall, Chapterhouse, Santa Maria Novella

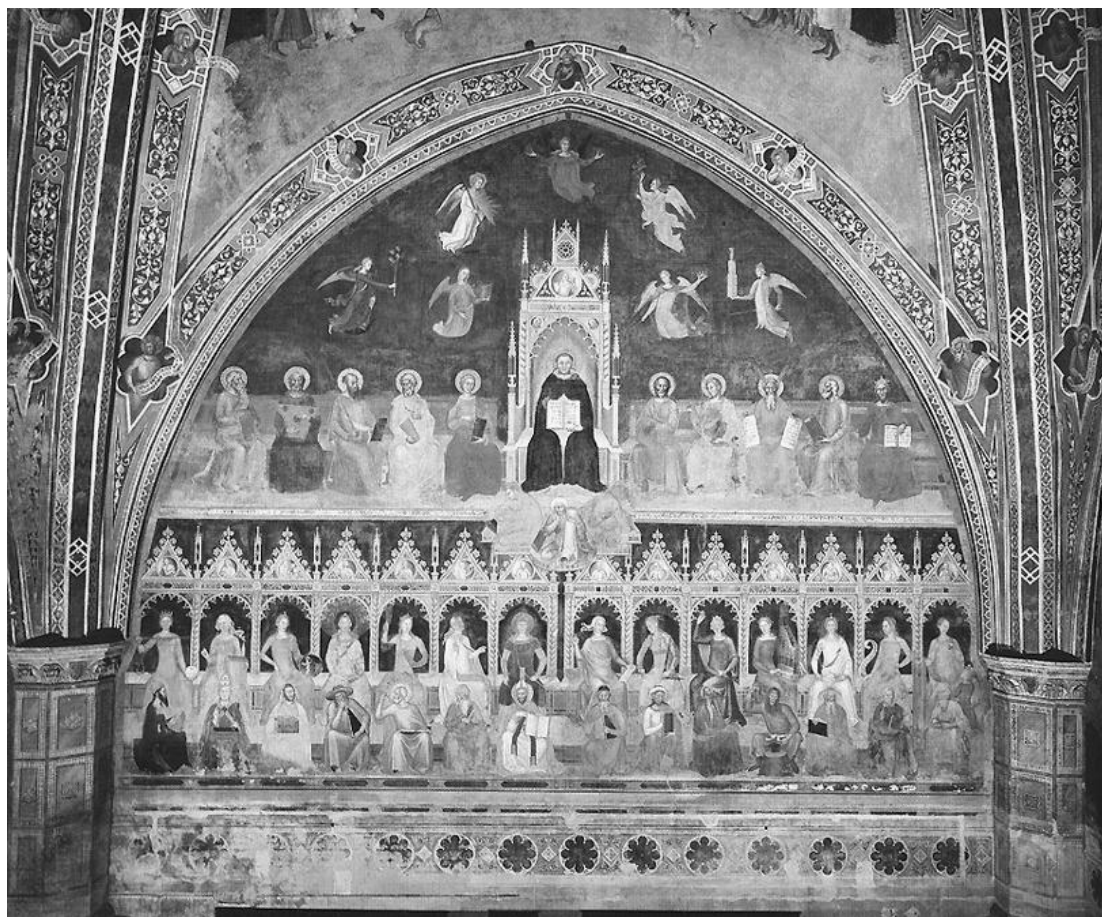


Figure 23 – Andrea di Bonaiuto, *St. Thomas Aquinas Enthroned*, west wall, Chapterhouse, Santa Maria Novella

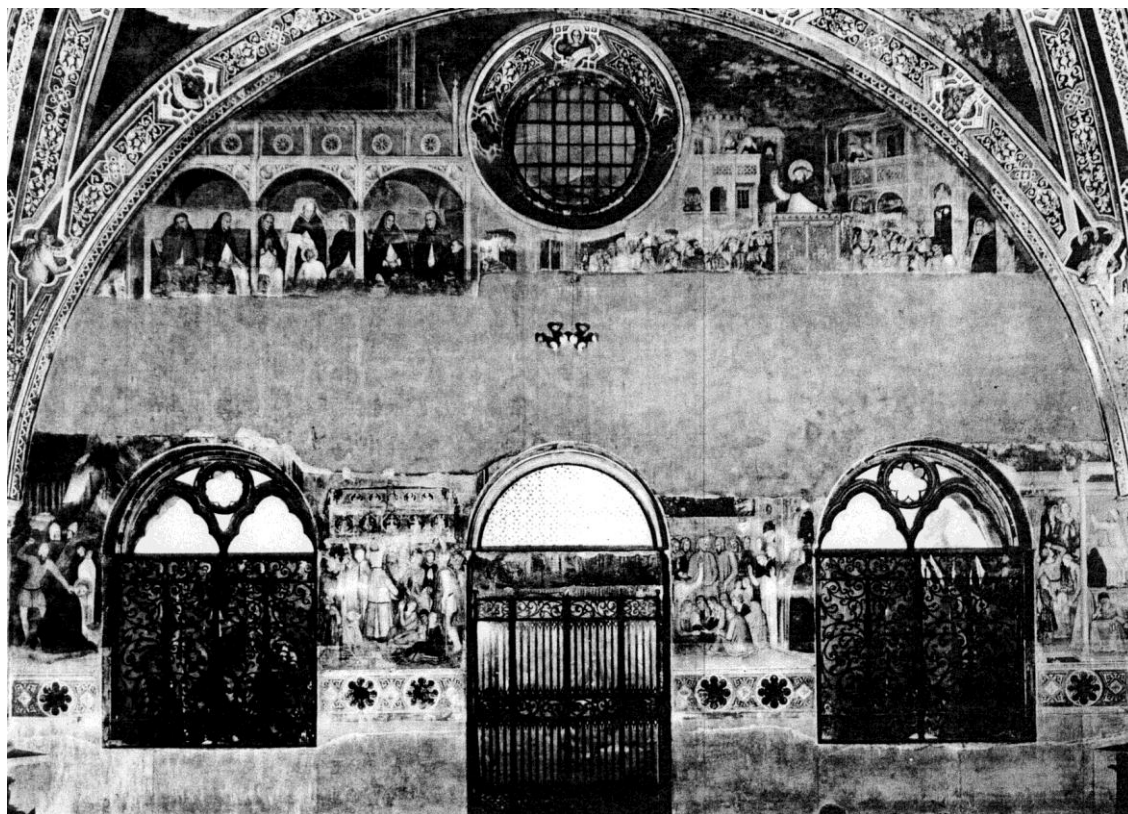


Figure 24 – Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Scenes from the Life of St. Dominic*, south wall, Chapterhouse, Santa Maria Novella



Figure 25 – Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Pentecost*, vault quadrant over the west wall, Chapterhouse, Santa Maria Novella

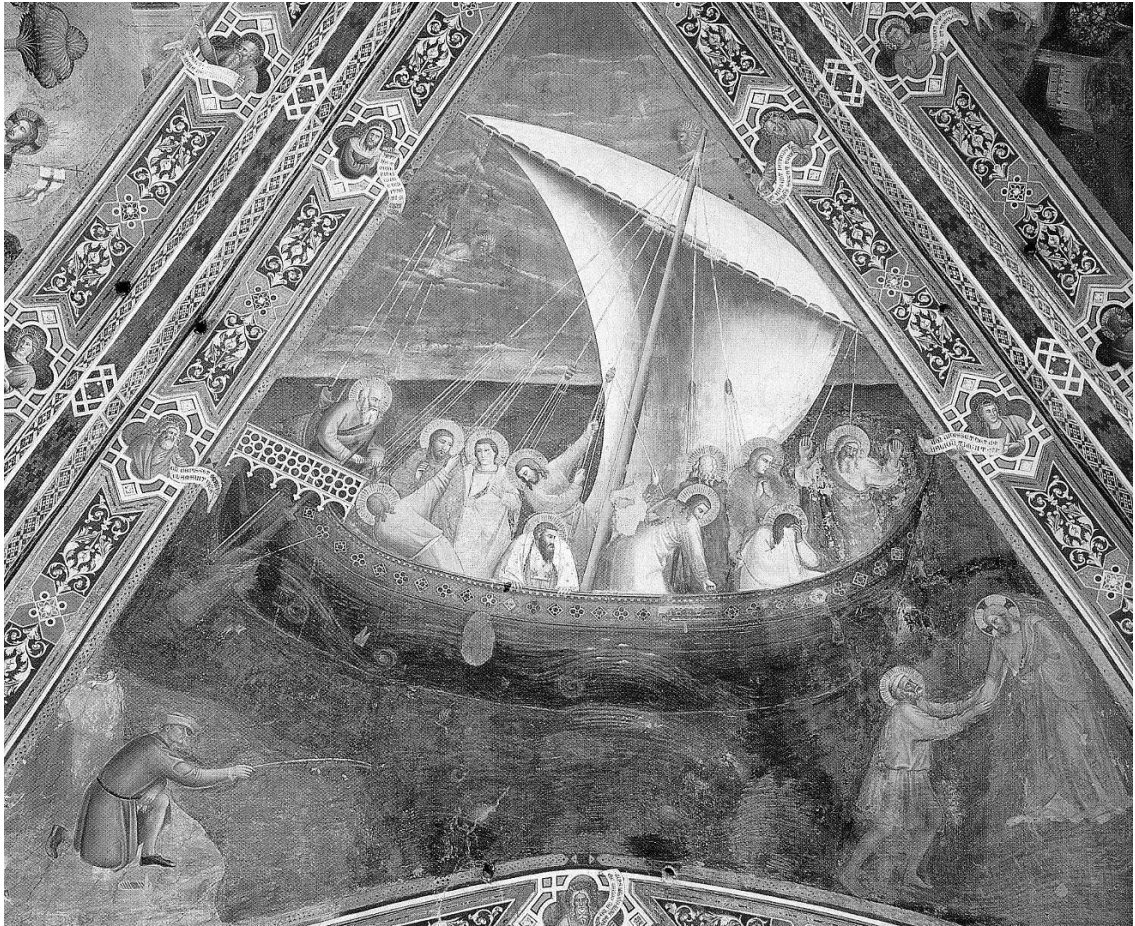


Figure 26 – Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Navicella*, vault quadrant over the east wall, Chapterhouse, Santa Maria Novella

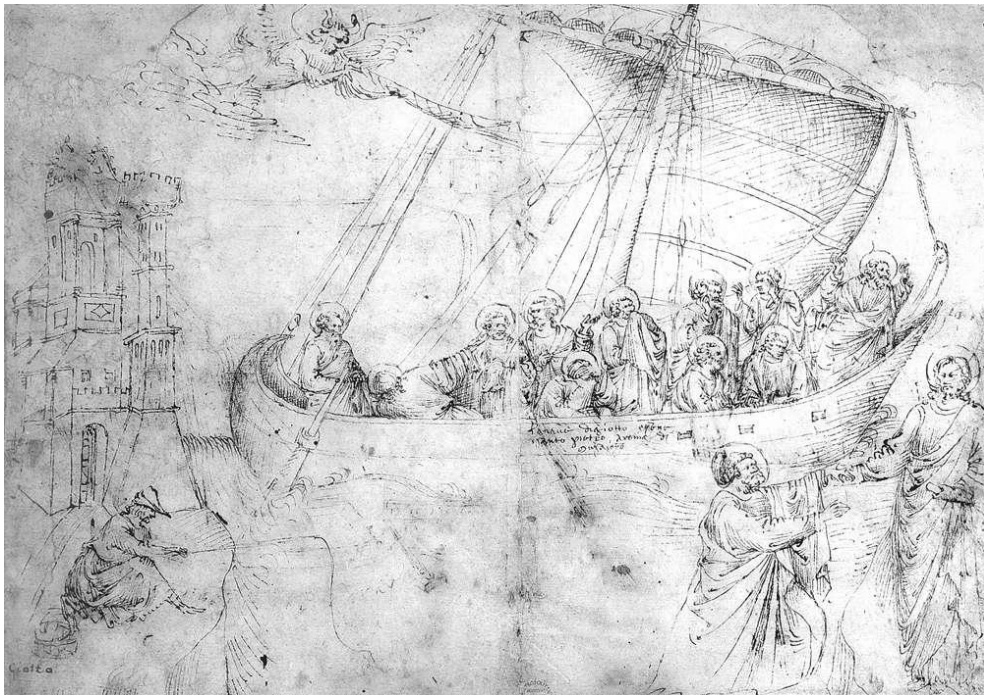


Figure 27 – Parri Spinelli, Copy after Giotto's *Navicella*, c. 1400

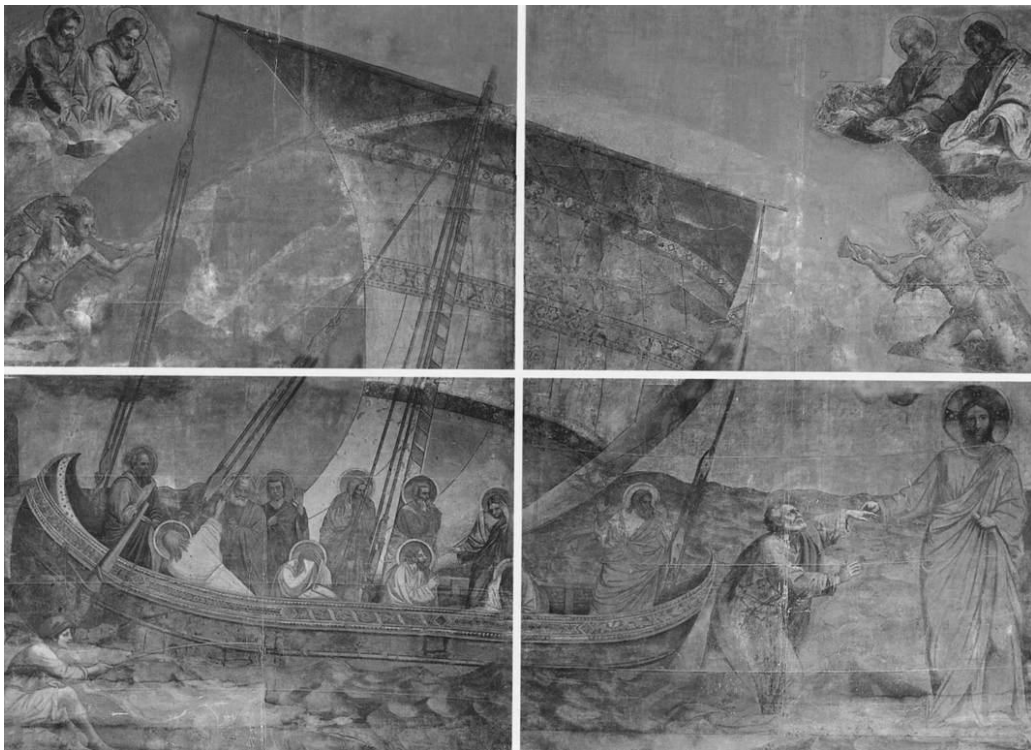


Figure 28 – Francesco Berretta, Copy after Giotto's *Navicella*, 1628



Figure 29 – The Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral, view to the south





Figure 30 – Luca Signorelli, *Dante with scenes from Purgatorio*, from the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral



Figure 31 – Luca Signorelli, *Statius (?)* with scenes from *Purgatorio*, from the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral

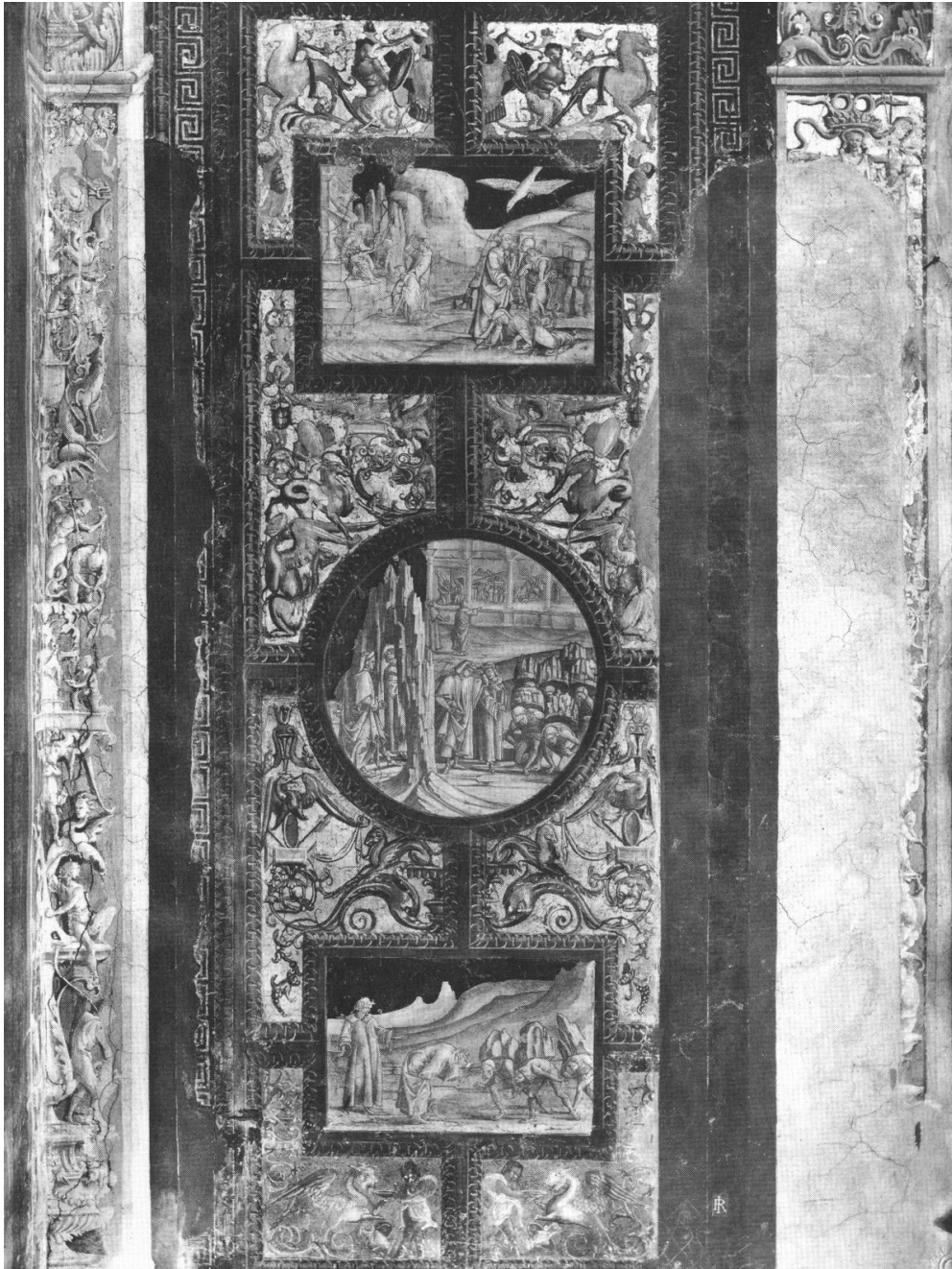


Figure 32 – Luca Signorelli, *Purgatorio* scenes from the south wall of the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral



Figure 33 – Luca Signorelli, *Virgil (?)* with mythological scenes of Aeneas, Hercules, and Orpheus, from the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral



Figure 34 – Luca Signorelli, *Ovid / Claudian (?)* with scenes from the Rape of Persephone, from the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral

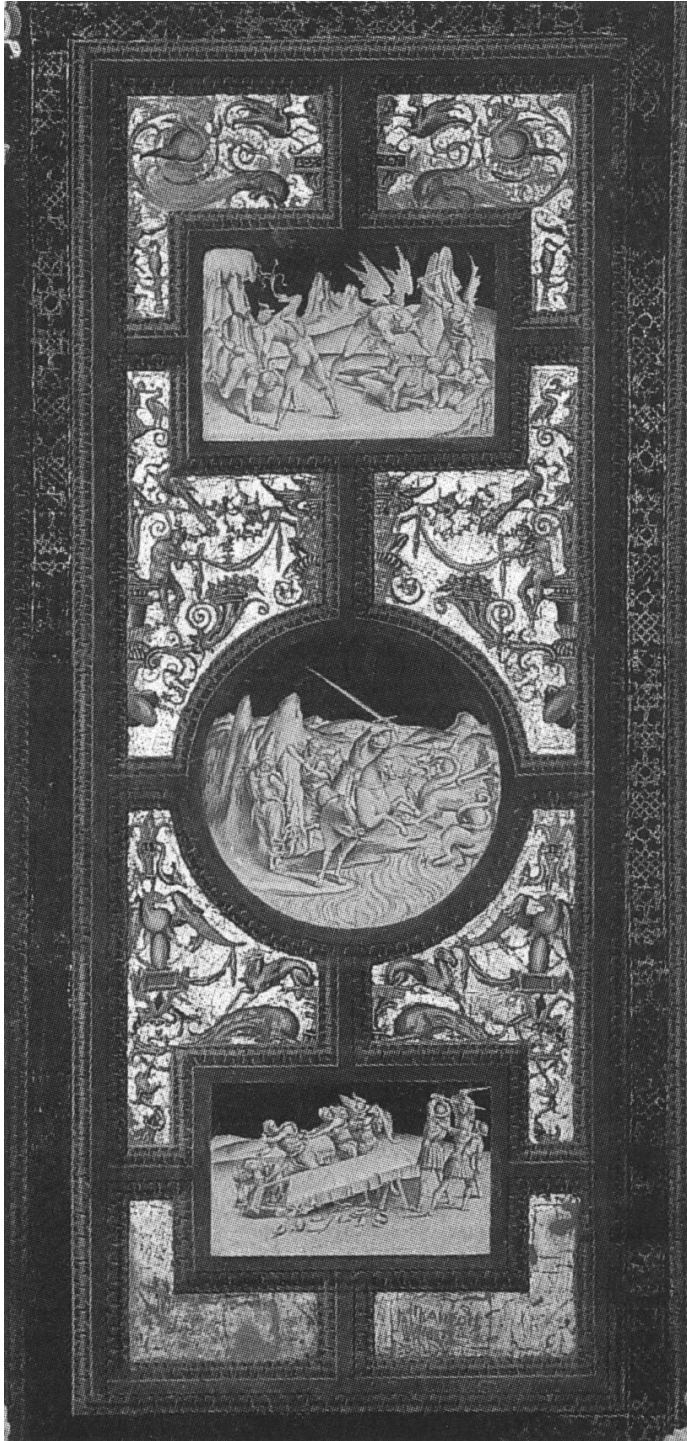


Figure 35 – Luca Signorelli, Mythological scenes from the south wall of the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral

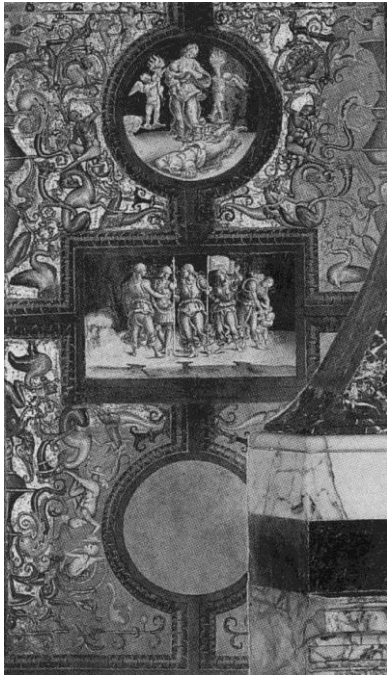


Figure 36 – Luca Signorelli, Medallions from the south wall, left of the altar, of the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral

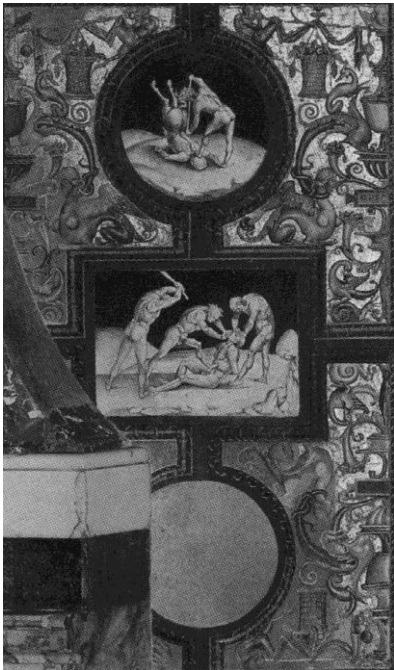


Figure 37 – Luca Signorelli, Medallions from the south wall, right of the altar, of the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral

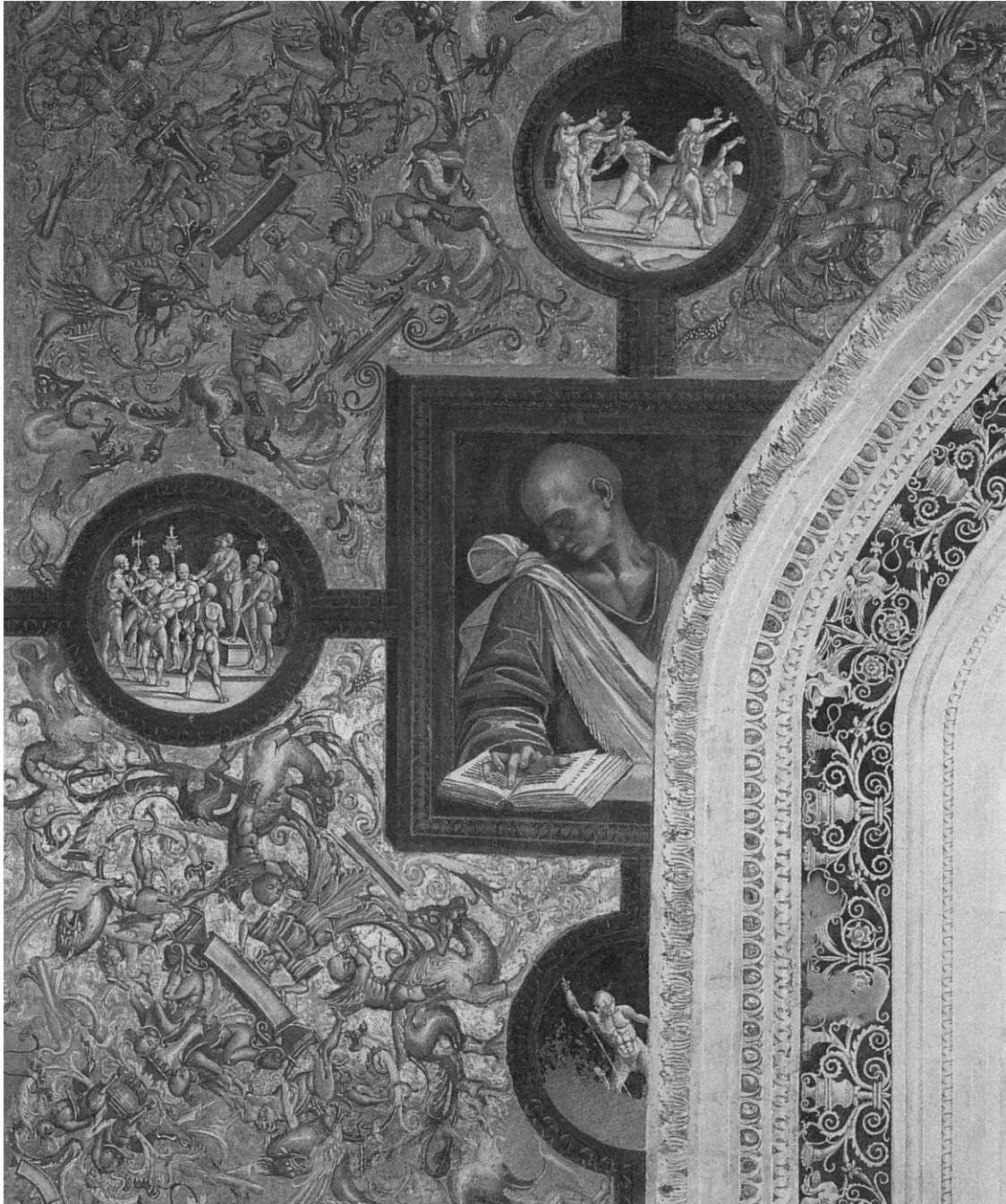


Figure 38 – Luca Signorelli, *Homer / Cicero* (?) with medallions, from the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral





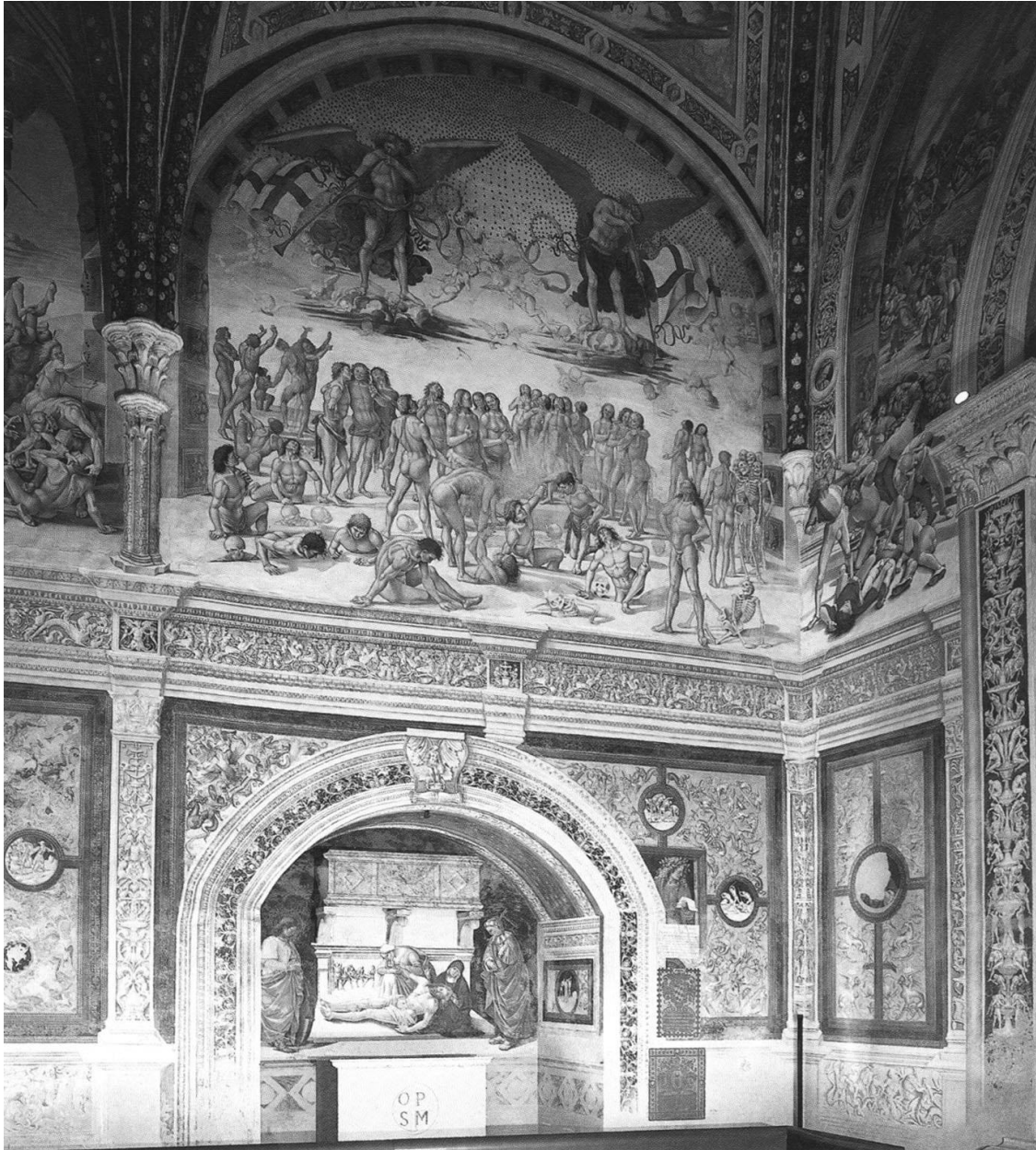


Figure 40 – View of the west wall of the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral, showing the Cappellina della Pietà

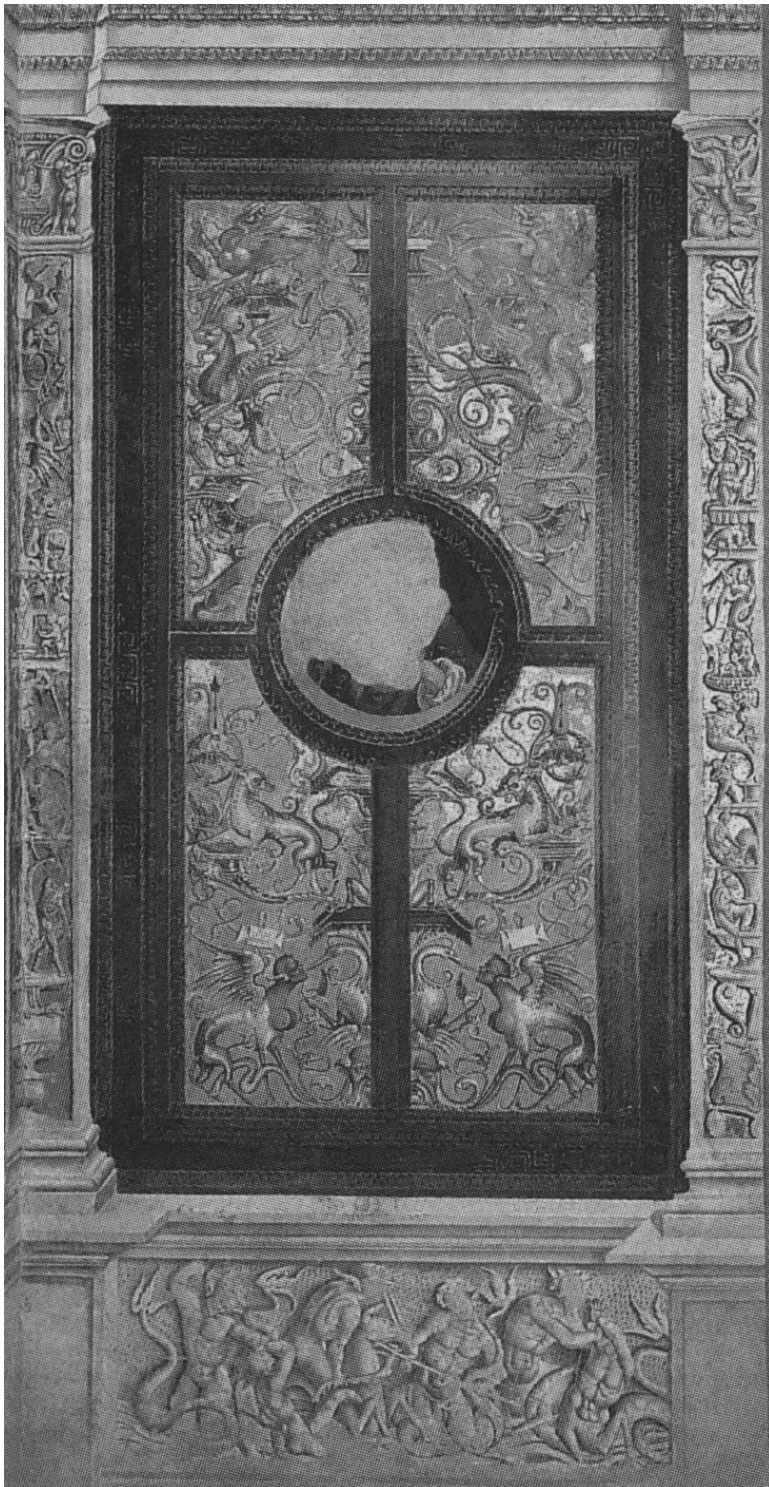


Figure 41 – Luca Signorelli, Damaged Poet from the entry wall of the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral



Figure 42 – Luca Signorelli, *Empedocles (?)*, from the entry wall of the Cappella Nova, Orvieto Cathedral

## CHAPTER 3

TYPOLOGICAL ALLEGORY AND REPRESENTATIONAL INCONGRUITY  
IN DONATELLO'S BRONZE *DAVID* AND BOTTICELLI'S MYTHOLOGIES

In *De Principiis*, Origen not only argued in favor of an allegorical meaning that lay hidden beneath the history and law described in the literal sense of the Bible, but also claimed that portions of that history and law were intentionally crafted by God to interrupt the logical progression of the Biblical narrative and thus to lead the reader to pause and pursue the deeper significance of passages that appear incongruous. Thus Origen wrote, in the second chapter of book IV:

But if in every detail of this outer covering, that is, the actual history, the sequence of the law had been preserved and its order maintained, we should have understood the scriptures in an unbroken course and should certainly not have believed that there was anything else buried within them beyond what was indicated at a first glance. Consequently the divine wisdom has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks and interruptions of the historical sense to be found therein, by inserting in the midst a number of impossibilities and incongruities, in order that the very interruption of the narrative might as it were present a barrier to the reader and lead him to refuse to proceed along the pathway of the ordinary meaning: and so, by shutting us out and debarring us from that, might recall us to the beginning of another way, and might thereby bring us, through the entrance of a narrow footpath, to a higher and loftier road and lay open the immense breadth of the divine wisdom. . . . All this, as we have said, the Holy Spirit supervised, in order that in cases where that which appeared at the first glance could neither be true nor useful we should be led on to search for a truth deeper down and needing more careful examination, and should try to discover in the scriptures which we believe to be inspired by God a meaning worthy of God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Origen, *De Principiis*, Book IV, chapter 2, section 9. *Origen on First Principles: Being Koetschau's Text of the De Principiis Translated into English, Together with an Introduction and Notes*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), 285-87.

On a basic level, Origen's method outlined the circumstances in which an allegorical interpretation was necessary: that when a portion of the Biblical narrative or the law given in the Bible text was unintelligible or incongruent in its literal meaning, the reader was to pursue its symbolic or allegorical significance. In this passage, however, Origen was not simply concerned with nature of the Bible, with the object and narrative that is placed before the reader, but also with the creator of that work. Origen attributed the incongruities and difficulties inherent in the Biblical text to the active design of its author, and attributed to Him the express purpose of causing the reader to question the literal meaning of His work and to contemplate the deeper levels of its allegorical significance.

Origen's method has significance not only for Biblical exegesis and the attempt to understand the motive and method of the Divine author, as Origen saw him, but also for the interpretation of other works of art, both literary and visual, and for the attempt to understand the motives and methods of those mortal creators, the artists of the Italian Renaissance. Just as an incongruous or unintelligible passage may cause the reader to contemplate the possible meanings inherent in a portion of Bible text, so also an incongruous element or unexpected form may cause the viewer to consider the allegorical meaning of a work of art. Furthermore, if the author of the Bible may be credited with the intentional inclusion of stumbling-blocks or intrusions to the Biblical narrative as signs that the allegorical meaning was, in those instances, of greater significance than the literal, perhaps also certain ambiguities of representation in Renaissance art could be seen as intentional signifiers of allegorical significance.

Origen's method applies to the programs of mural decoration described in the previous chapter. In each instance, particular elements are incongruous to the cycle or narrative that is presented elsewhere in the program—the Old Testament subjects represented in medallions in the Arena Chapel are not part of the New Testament

narrative that is presented in the larger scenes that decorate the walls, the contemporary scenes that decorate the side and entry walls of the Chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella are not part of the Passion sequence that covers the altar wall and vault of that space, and the mythological subjects depicted in grisaille medallions on the socle of Orvieto Cathedral's Cappella Nova appear to be entirely at odds with the Christian space and the Christian subjects that are presented on the walls and vault above. As shown in the previous chapter, these elements are, in each instance, included for their allegorical significance rather than their literal meaning. It is only as types or allegories of analogical significance that these elements function within the greater programs of decoration, and until this is properly recognized the seemingly incongruous elements appear at odds with the larger narrative cycles and are difficult to comprehend in relation to scenes with which they are juxtaposed.

To a large extent, it is the juxtaposition of scenes from disparate traditions in the more elaborate programs of mural decoration that reveals the necessity of allegorical interpretation. The pairing of narrative elements from seemingly incongruous traditions is a stumbling-block or intrusion to the easy reading and comprehension of an iconographic program. Allegorical meaning is not confined to incongruous scenes within a greater cycle, however, nor is it signified only by an interruption of the narrative progress. Certain free-standing or self-contained works of Renaissance art display similar incongruence in the relationship between form and subject and may in this manner signify the intention of the artist to convey allegorical significance and the necessity of allegorical interpretation on the part of the viewer. It is here proposed that certain works of Renaissance art were intentionally ambiguous, or more properly incorporated elements that appear to be at odds or incongruous on a literal level of interpretation, and were intended by the artist to convey, through that ambiguity or incongruity, a polysemaity of subject that depended on the perceived typological relationship between figures or events

from the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions. Thus, in certain instances Renaissance artists evoked or signified the necessity of an allegorical interpretation for their work not only through juxtaposition of narrative scenes from disparate traditions, but also through a seemingly incongruous juxtaposition of form and subject. If these incongruities of representation have, in certain instances, prevented the easy comprehension of the subject and meaning conveyed in a work of art, this unfortunate effect only serves to prove Origen's method and to provide hope that when the allegorical significance of the work is understood, the tension between form and subject will be resolved.

This chapter pursues the allegorical significance of two works of art from the Italian Quattrocento that are well known to art historical scholarship and of unparalleled significance to any understanding of the Renaissance response to classical antiquity, but continue to resist any easy comprehension or scholarly consensus: Donatello's bronze *David* and Botticelli's *Primavera*.<sup>2</sup> Both works are truly "monstrous," to use James Elkins' term.<sup>3</sup> Each work appears to have multiple meanings that are contradictory, and each work has attracted so much scholarly attention, attracted so many different interpretations, that it is effectively out of the reach of any but the most profound and probing discourse. Indeed, the often obscuring lacquer of scholarly interpretations that has built up over each of these works is, in itself, a stumbling-block and interruption to the study and comprehension of each work. The particular nature of these works and the accidents of their respective histories conspire to require such intense and continued interest, and will bring about further interpretation and debate, perhaps without end. Not only does each of these works display those ambiguities or incongruities of representation

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<sup>2</sup> Donatello's proper name was Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi. Botticelli was Alessandro Filipepi.

<sup>3</sup> James Elkins, "On Monstrously Ambiguous Paintings," *History and Theory* 32:3 (October 1993), 227-47. Elkins defined his term in the opening paragraph, 227.



which prevent an easy, literal reading and invite, even require scholarly interpretation, but each of these works also comes to modern scholarship without any clear or conclusive record of its origins, and thus deprives the art historian of any sure support for his or her interpretation. If these works were not necessarily self-contained or free-standing when first displayed, they come to the modern era orphaned, as it were, and, barring any future archaeological or archival discoveries, each will be understood only from physical analysis or iconographic interpretation.

Despite the inherent uncertainty of their origins, these two works remain essential to the history and development of Italian Renaissance art. Each work is commonly celebrated as a “first” in the development of the Renaissance response to classical antiquity—the first known full-figure, free-standing male nude since Antiquity, and the first instance since Antiquity of the reintegration of classical subject and classical form, depicted on a scale previously reserved for Christian subjects. If these two works are essential to our understanding of the Renaissance period—of the beliefs, interests, and values of those who lived in Italy during that particular period of European history—they are vital also to this study, as each work displays an incongruence of representation that will, ultimately, be resolved only through the recognition of the perceived typology between the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions that variously provide the subjects and forms of the figures represented in the *David* and the *Primavera*.

#### Donatello's Bronze *David*

It is not the purpose of this study to establish, beyond a credible doubt, that Donatello's bronze *David* (Figure 43) is a polysemous work, with the Biblical hero David as its primary subject and the pagan god Mercury as a secondary image. This has been proposed and explored sufficiently by other scholars, Jenö Lányi, Patricia Ann Leach,

and Francis Ames-Lewis foremost among them.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, this interpretation has been critiqued, most notably by H. W. Janson, who argued against Lányi's unpublished hypothesis, and by John Shearman, who rather unfortunately conflated the "syncretic" interpretation of the *David* with another proposal that the statue has at its subject Mercury rather than David and dismissed both readings on the basis of certain misreadings and methodological difficulties that trouble the latter claim.<sup>5</sup> Janson's response to Lányi's proposal of a "syncretic merger" of David and Mercury, was duly addressed by Leach, whose 1983 Ph.D. dissertation was conceived as a reply to Janson and an exploration of the *David* as a typological representation of David and Mercury. What Leach has done well, the present study need not repeat.

Leach's dissertation, though accessible, remains unpublished and appears to have had relatively little impact on subsequent scholarship. Her dissertation was not cited by Shearman, though he oversaw the completion of her work at Princeton, or by Ames-

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<sup>4</sup> Lányi's work remained unpublished at his death in 1940, but was described in part in H. W. Janson, *The sculpture of Donatello, incorporating the notes and photographs of the late Jenő Lányi*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 83, 84; and in John Pope-Hennessy, "Donatello's Bronze David," in *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Federico Zeri*, (Milano: Electa, and Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1984), 122-127; Patricia Ann Leach, "Images of Political Triumph: Donatello's Iconography of Heroes," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1983; Francis Ames-Lewis, "Donatello's bronze *David* and the Palazzo Medici courtyard," *Renaissance Studies* 3:3 (September 1989), 235-51.

<sup>5</sup> John Shearman, *Only Connect...: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1988, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20-22. Shearman did credit Lányi with the initial concept and addressed Ames-Lewis' article ("Donatello's Bronze David"), but focused more on refuting the studies by Alessandro Parronchi and John Pope-Hennessy, which did not propose a syncretic or typological interpretation, but suggested instead that the statue is a Mercury and not a David—thus the title of Parronchi's chapter: *Mercurio e non David*. Alessandro Parronchi, *Donatello e il potere* (Bologna: Cappelli and Florence: Il portolano, 1980); John Pope-Hennessy, "Donatello's Bronze David," in *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Federico Zeri* (Milan: Electa, and Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1984), 122-27.

Lewis, who nonetheless found enough similarity between the appearance of the *David* and the iconographic motifs associated with Mercury—that is, he accepted the associations proposed by Alessandro Parronchi and John Pope-Hennessy, if not their claims that the figure is a representation of Mercury *rather than* a David—to admit the possibility of a dual identity for the figure that is the *David*.<sup>6</sup> Leach has only just begun to appear in bibliographic citations—Christine Sperling, in 1992, referred to those who would question the statue’s iconography and subject, including Parronchi, Pope-Hennessy, and cited Ames-Lewis in the associated footnote, with a certain ambiguity as to whether he is one such scholar or simply a good example of an “overview of recent scholarship;” Sarah Blake McHam, in 2001, did cite Leach as the scholar who “most fully explored the underlying motives for merging David and Mercury in fifteenth-century Florence,” but gave Ames-Lewis, and Parronchi and Pope-Hennessy, higher billing in the same footnote.<sup>7</sup> These are only representative examples.

Though Leach’s study has not had a visibly dramatic effect on subsequent scholarship, the idea that the *David* is a figure both of David and of Mercury may be starting to reach the mainstream of art historical discourse, either from Leach, but quietly, or, more likely, in response to the various proposals that have been put forth over the years. Paoletti and Radke, in their broad and admirable survey of Italian Renaissance art,

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Ames-Lewis withheld final judgment pending an explanation of the relationship between the proposed secondary image of Mercury and the decoration of the Palazzo Medici courtyard, which, he said, “may not prove to be an impossible task, but does not come within the scope of [his] article.” Ames-Lewis, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 239. Parronchi, *Donatello e il potere*; Pope-Hennessy, “Donatello’s Bronze David.”

<sup>7</sup> Christine Sperling, “Donatello’s Bronze *David* and the Demands of Medici Politics,” *The Burlington Magazine* 134:1069 (April 1992), 218, n. 2; Sarah Blake McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze *David* and *Judith* as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence,” *The Art Bulletin* 83:1 (March 2001), 32, n. 14.

described the *David* as a possible representation of *both* David and Mercury, though their discussion of its typology was limited to a single paragraph and cited only “some modern historians” who propose the single identity of Mercury *instead of* David.<sup>8</sup> Rather than repeating that which is elsewhere achieved in a more extensive study—Leach’s assertion that the bronze *David* is a typological representation of David and Mercury, simultaneously—it will remain to pursue the operation of a typological representation in the early Italian Renaissance, i.e. the manner in which Donatello fused two figures into one, the particular conditions that allowed such a fusion, and the visual signs that such a representation was intended and that an allegorical interpretation was required, rather than a literal reading of the subject or narrative.

Whatever else Donatello’s bronze *David* may be—it is celebrated as the first nearly life-sized, free-standing male nude statue since Antiquity, and its public display in the courtyard of the Palazzo Medici, together with an accompanying inscription that referred to the citizenry and the overthrow of tyranny, suggest it to have been perceived as a statement of Medici power and / or the social and civic aspirations of that family—the work, itself, is strangely, and intentionally, ambiguous in representation. It is this ambiguity which has given rise to the typological interpretation of its subject, and which signals the propriety of such an interpretation. Osvald Sirén, writing in 1914, aptly described the essential cause of this ambiguity: though the figure takes as its most apparent subject a common and traditional representation, it is stripped of any clear reference to that subject and presented instead in accordance with an aesthetic that is foreign to its own origins. In Sirén’s words:

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<sup>8</sup> John Paoletti and Gary Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 3rd ed., (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2005), 268.

As a conception of a traditional and quite common motive [sic], it is extraordinary. Were there no attributes, nobody would ever suspect it to represent the young shepherd of the Bible. A glance at Donatello's earlier figures of David in Florence (in the Museo Nazionale and in the Palazzo Martelli) convinces us that the artist has not conceived this later bronze as an illustration of the Davidic motive, but as a classical nude, quite incidentally vested with the sword (not with the sling) and the head of Goliath.<sup>9</sup>

As Sirén indicated, Donatello showed in his earlier work that he knew and understood the iconographic tradition or convention of representing David as a young man with a sling and stone, standing with the severed head of Goliath.<sup>10</sup> (Figure 44) His bronze *David* stands not only as a departure from that established tradition, but a departure from his own work. In the bronze *David*, the youth is, to use Sirén's term, decidedly un-Davidic. He is not clothed and does not hold the sling that is an essential component of his iconographic presentation. Furthermore, the head of Goliath is here encased in armor and shows no wound to the forehead. Together, these three motifs—the nudity of the figure, the lack of a sling, and the lack of a wound to the head of Goliath—interrupt the viewer's recognition of the apparent narrative. The nudity of the figure is not consistent with the Bible text—in Samuel I, 17:38-39 David removes the armor in which Saul had clothed him, but is not described as entering into battle unclothed—and the omission of other motifs that are associated with the subject that is presented—the sling that David uses to bring down the giant and the wound in Goliath's head where the stone struck him—compromises the relationship between the figure, as represented, and the text to which it relates. If we can not be sure whether or not Donatello *conceived* of the bronze as an

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<sup>9</sup> Osvald Sirén, "The Importance of the Antique to Donatello," *American Journal of Archaeology* 18:4 (October–December 1914), 453.

<sup>10</sup> The "Martelli *David*" has since been reattributed to Bernardo or Antonio Rossellino.

illustration of the Davidic motive, again quoting Sirèn, we can be sure that he did not craft the representation as an illustration of the David motive—that is, he did not give his figure those attributes that would be commonly recognized as relating to the Biblical David and understood as relating to the narrative that is the apparent subject of the work. In deviating from the source text and from established tradition, Donatello introduced a high degree of representational ambiguity, even to the extent that subsequent generations—modern scholars—would come to question the very identity of his figure. Given that Donatello had already crafted multiple successful versions of the same subject—or, more properly, of that subject which would appear to be the primary representation also of the bronze *David*—one may presume that the artist knowingly deviated from the Davidic motive, that his decision to jeopardized the ability of the work to readily communicate its subject was intentional, and that Donatello had a significant reason for doing so.

If the particular representation of the bronze is ambiguous in its representation of David, so also is it ambiguous in any additional representations. Certain scholars have proposed that the figure is a Mercury *rather than* a David, and have rightly drawn a critical response from their peers.<sup>11</sup> If, as Parronchi and Pope-Hennessy proposed, the figure were a Mercury, standing over the severed head of Argus, then Donatello's *Mercury* would be every bit as un-Mercurial as his *David* would be un-Davidic. The figure does wear a hat that is similar to Mercury's *petasus*, does have wings at his feet—or one wing to one side of one leg—is classically nude, and does stand in a pose that is strikingly similar to that of the Praxitelean Hermes type (Figure 45) (though one may also

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<sup>11</sup> Parronchi and Pope-Hennessy have proposed that the figure is Mercury rather than David. Parronchi, *Donatello e il potere*; Pope-Hennessy, "Donatello's Bronze David." Shearman rightly criticizes aspects of their arguments. Shearman, *Only Connect*, 20-22.

observe that the pose is similar to that of Donatello's marble *David* of c. 1407).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, various classical texts, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, recount a story in which Mercury triumphs over a giant adversary, Argus, and severs his head with a sword, thus providing a possible source text for the statue in question.<sup>13</sup> Yet, just as the particular representation that is Donatello's bronze statue does not accord in certain significant details with the Biblical account of David's triumph over Goliath, so, also, the representation does not accord in significant details with those texts which describe Mercury's triumph over Argus. Donatello's figure does *not* wear Mercury's winged hat or winged boots, does not hold the pipes with which Mercury lulled Argus to sleep, does not hold an oversized sword that would be incongruous in such a representation, and stands over a head that has only two eyes, rather than Argus' many.<sup>14</sup> If the statue is not a straightforward illustration of David over Goliath, neither is it a straightforward illustration of Mercury over Argus.

The representational ambiguity inherent in Donatello's bronze *David* does make possible the dual identity of the figure group as David over Goliath *and* Mercury over Argus, and, furthermore, signals the propriety of such an interpretation, even requires it. Donatello need not have known Origen in order to have employed a system of representation similar to that which Origen described as active in the significative and

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<sup>12</sup> Lànyi had apparently seen these iconographic motifs as relating to Mercury—see Janson's critique of Lànyi's proposed reading, Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 84. Sirèn noted the relation between the figure and the Praxitelean Hermes type. Sirèn, "Importance of the Antique," 453-55. Parronchi and Pope-Hennessy described these and other motifs as relating to Mercury. Parronchi, *Donatello e il potere*; Pope-Hennessy, "Donatello's Bronze David."

<sup>13</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1:668-721.

<sup>14</sup> Shearman raised some of these objections, and others. Shearman, *Only Connect*, 20-21.

allegorical modes of Scripture. Just as the Author of Scripture, according to Origen, incorporated incongruence into the history and law that are described therein as a means toward interrupting a literal reading of the text, thereby causing the reader to pause and consider the deeper, allegorical significance, so also Donatello interrupted the viewer's comprehension of his work as a literal representation—an illustration of a given narrative—and, causing the viewer to pause, necessitated an allegorical interpretation. Because the *David* is un-Davidic, because it has been stripped of any clear marker or attribute that would allow a literal comprehension of the narrative, it must be interpreted allegorically, as something more than an illustration, something more than a literal *David*.

Donatello was careful to craft his figure group in such a manner that it could not be interpreted as either of its dual identities alone, but only as a simultaneous representation of both David and Mercury. Though his David does not have a sling, and though his Goliath does not show a wound, they may still be David and Goliath—there is nothing in the representation that explicitly precludes such a reading. Furthermore, *because* the David does not have a sling, and *because* the Goliath does not show a wound, these figures are not limited to that single identity. The same formula applies to the suggestion that the figure group represents Mercury: the lack of a winged hat or boots, even the lack of Argus' additional eyes need not preclude a secondary association with the messenger god and his foe, just as the addition of a *petasus* and the evocative placement of a wing do not limit the work to that subject. Because the *David* is characterized by representational ambiguity, David may *also* be Mercury, and Mercury may be David. The statue evokes both identities, and thus permits both interpretations, while avoiding the explicit representation of either, which would then preclude the other.

Donatello succeeded in conveying the dual identity of his figure group not only through his subtle reworking of motifs associated with both David and Mercury—those iconographic attributes such as the stone in David / Mercury's hand, the *petasus* on his



head, even, perhaps, the wing that rises above his ankle—but also through the juxtaposition of a Judeo-Christian subject (for the *David* is a David) and an antique form. The very form of the *David* is incongruent to its apparent subject: the statue presents a holy figure from the Judeo-Christian tradition in a classically inspired pose, conspicuously, even gratuitously nude. Not only is the nudity of the *David* foreign to the conventions of representing that figure, the Biblical David, but the very concept of sculptural nudity divorced from a causal narrative is foreign to the conventions of Judeo-Christian art. Inasmuch as the nudity of the figure is gratuitous—that is, aesthetic rather than iconographic—it here contrasts with the traditions and conventions which should determine the form appropriate to the subject, and draws attention to its own origins rather than those of the subject represented.

A certain tension arises from this contrast, from the juxtaposition of classical form and Judeo-Christian subject, just as a tension can be felt between iconographic elements from disparate traditions when juxtaposed within a larger cycle of decoration, as seen in the studies of the previous chapter. Here, the tension between form and subject will not be resolved until the cause for such a representation is understood—until the viewer recognizes that the allegory underlying the representational ambiguity depends on a perceived typological relationship of subjects from the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions.

There is a similarity of plot and theme in the stories of David's triumph over Goliath and Mercury's triumph over Argus. The Bible described David as young shepherd and a gifted musician, who, in earlier in the Biblical narrative, used his music to soothe King Saul when the latter was troubled by an evil spirit (Samuel I, 16:23). David also was victor over Goliath, a giant and champion of the Philistine army. David felled Goliath with a stone thrown from a sling and cut off the giant's head with his own sword (Samuel I, 17:45-51). In classical mythology, recounted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*

and described elsewhere by various other authors, Mercury was sent by Jupiter, the ruler of the Olympian gods, to slay the giant Argus, who had been charged by Juno with guarding Io from Jupiter's lascivious intentions. Disguised as a shepherd, Mercury approached the ever-watchful Argus. Gaining his trust and company, Mercury lulled him to sleep with music played on the pipes and, when the giant closed the last of his hundred eyes, cut his head off with a sword.<sup>15</sup> If the particular details differ, the essential subjects of the Biblical account and the pagan myth are similar. Though one was a story of Israel's future king saving that land by the will of God and the other a fantastic tale of the means by which a lusty god removes a barrier to the fulfillment of his desires, both were tales in which a shepherd stepped forth to defeat a mighty giant, brought that monster to the ground unconscious, and beheaded his enemy. In both stories, the hero removed his garments—David the tunic and armor of Saul and Mercury his cap and wings, to take the guise of a shepherd. Furthermore, one classical tradition even held that Mercury brought down his foe with a stone. Apollodorus, in his *Library*, wrote that:

[Argus] tethered [Io, as a cow] to the olive tree which was in the grove of the Mycenaean. But Zeus ordered Hermes to steal the cow, and as Hermes could not do it secretly because Hierax had blabbed, he killed Argus by the cast of a stone; whence he was called Argiphontes.<sup>16</sup>

It was not only the similarity between David and Mercury in their respective narrative traditions that marked possible a typological comparison between the two characters and their simultaneous representation in Donatello's *David*, but also the

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<sup>15</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1:668-721.

<sup>16</sup> Apollodorus *Library* 2.1.3. Apollodorus, *The Library*, James George Frazer, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and London: W. Heinemann, Ltd., 1961, 133.

contemporary perception that such a typology was possible. Without the Renaissance belief that classical mythologies could, like the Biblical narrative, contain typological allegories beneath the level of the literal narrative, the similarities between the pagan and Judeo-Christian characters may have gone unnoticed or may have been perceived as lacking in any real significance. It was only in and after the fourteenth-century, when Christian authorities proposed and accepted the expansion of typology to include not only Biblical text, which is to say Judeo-Christian narrative and history, but also extra-Biblical narrative that the parallels between David as giant killer and Mercury as Argiphontes would have had any real significance in the mind of the Christian reader or viewer. Recall that Thomas Aquinas had distinguished the allegories of the Bible from other, secular works and described the action of God in Judeo-Christian history, so shaping events that they, themselves, had meaning, which was then conveyed also in the text that recorded them.<sup>17</sup> In order for classical mythology to participate also in the typological relationships that characterized the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, classical myth would also have had to have been so shaped by its author—or more properly to have been so shaped by God, working through the classical author—as to also prefigure Christian events or mysteries. The proposal that Donatello's *David* presents a fusion of typologically related figures from pagan mythology and Judeo-Christian narrative depends, therefore, on the recognition of a Renaissance perception that classical authors—in this case the anonymous poets who first composed the myths of the pagan gods—were theologians as well as poets. This idea, the concept of the *theologicae poetae*, was developed by Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Salutati, and current in Florence by the end of the Trecento, though not as fully syncretic or as refined as it would become under Marsilio

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<sup>17</sup> Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 1:10. See also chapter 1 of this study, above.

Ficino or Pico della Mirandola.<sup>18</sup> Donatello's *David* may depend, to some degree, on the idea of a classical populace that participated, at least to an extent, in the mysteries of Christianity and expressed them allegorically in the narrative that comprised pagan mythology.

The representational ambiguities and juxtapositions that characterize the bronze *David* indicate the propriety, even the necessity of interpreting its subject on an allegorical level, rather than on a literal or illustrative level. Thus, the figure may be a typological comparison and simultaneous representation of the Biblical David and the mythological Mercury, relating to early Quattrocento perceptions of the possible relations between classical myth and the Judeo-Christian Bible and to what was a developing Renaissance belief in the theological knowledge of the poets and philosophers of antiquity. What is ultimately lacking from our modern understanding of the work, however, is the very reason for this representation. The subject or subjects of the *David* can be understood from the particulars of its representation, but the significance of the statue, its meaning or message in the minds of artist and patron and in the context of its original or intended display, may be impossible to discern, despite the attempts of scholars to the contrary. Though scholars have put forth various interpretations, and will no doubt continue to do so, the ambiguities that characterize not only the representation, but also the patronage, dating, and original display of the statue continue to foil attempts to unlock the underlying motive for the work, its literal *raison d'être*.

What the *David* provides, if not ultimately its own meaning, is an entry into a method of interpretation. A study of the *David's* mode of representation, such as this one, presents a model that can be judiciously applied to other works of the period which

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<sup>18</sup> On the *theologica poetica*, see Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (London: Constable & Co, 1970), 2:683-704.

present the same or similar features—i.e. representational ambiguity, an incongruity of iconographic elements or of form and subject, a juxtaposition of classical and Judeo-Christian elements which may depend on a Renaissance perception of a typological relation between the two traditions. Inasmuch as such a work can be found, the *David* may be seen not only as an isolated and somewhat problematic *uniquum*, but as one in a series of works which, through their pattern of shared characteristics, reveal certain aspects of the Renaissance beliefs in the potential for polysemaity in text and image, the allegorical levels of interpretation inherent in both classical and Judeo-Christian narratives, and the methods by which these can be represented in art.

#### Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*

Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera* offer, respectively, a test and a proof of the methodological model that is proposed here for determining the propriety of reading a work of art from the Italian Quattrocento as polysemous and, specifically, as a typological representation that draws together the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions and depends, for its subject or significance, on Renaissance perceptions that the sacred texts of both traditions participated in the full range of allegorical modes. Both works have previously been described as typological. Ernst Gombrich, in his "Study in the Neo-Platonic Symbolism of [Botticelli's] Circle" considered these and the *Pallas and the Centaur* according to "the typological approach," and he referred both to Horne and, vaguely, to "other critics" who had seen or suggested a greater degree of Christian form than classical in the *Birth of Venus*.<sup>19</sup> The methodological model that is proposed here,

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<sup>19</sup> Ernst Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neo-Platonic Symbolism of his Circle," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1945), 7-60; reprint in Ernst Gombrich *Symbolic Images: Studies in the art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1972), 31-81 (page citations are to the reprint edition). On the

however, as a means of determining the propriety of a typological interpretation, reveals one of these paintings to be a relatively straightforward narrative presentation, with no inherent ambiguity of representation and therefore no requisite allegorical interpretation, and the other, which is so characterized by ambiguity that the very identity of its protagonist has been misunderstood almost since its creation, to be exceedingly similar to the bronze *David* in its typological approach and in the manner in which this is conveyed visually.

Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (Figure 46) was a novel work for its period, and therefore significant to the development of art in the early Renaissance. Like the bronze *David*, it has been hailed as an artistic "first" or, more particularly, as a "first since antiquity." The *David* was the first full-sized, free-standing male nude statue created in Europe after the classical era. The *Birth of Venus* was, or appears to have been the first large-scale depiction of a pagan deity in a classical, rather than contemporary form in Europe after the classical era, and as such was the embodiment of Panofsky's idea of the reintegration of classical subject and form, for that author a defining characteristic of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>20</sup> Other scholars, however, noted a degree of similarity between the composition of the *Birth of Venus* and the typical representation of a common Christian subject, the Baptism of Christ. Fritz Saxl made a point of this in an unpublished lecture, and Gombrich put the idea into print.<sup>21</sup> In the body of his study, Gombrich compared the composition of the *Birth of Venus* to that of Alessio Baldovinetti's *Baptism of Christ*

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"typological approach" to the *Primavera*, *Pallas and the Centaur*, and *Birth of Venus*, see *Symbolic Images*, 62-64, 70-72, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960), 101, 109-13.

<sup>21</sup> Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 73, 218 n. 156, which includes a reference to Saxl's lecture.

from the Museo di San Marco, Florence (Figure 47), though he cautioned in a footnote that this was a conceptual comparison rather than a proposed model-copy relationship and noted, further, that a panel from Lorenzo Ghiberti's first set of bronze doors for the Florentine Baptistery is even closer to Botticelli's "scheme" in the inclusion of flying angels, who are like the winds in the *Birth of Venus*.<sup>22</sup> Even Gombrich, though, cautioned against overestimating the significance of this compositional similarity. Thus, he wrote: "How far the artist, in making use of such a formula, was thinking of its precise theological significance, it is, of course, impossible to determine."<sup>23</sup>

There is a high degree of compositional similarity between Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and the conventional representation of the Baptism of Christ. The painting and the trope, if they may be so distinguished, both present an upright central figure, in or on water, framed by an attendant to the right, who leans and reaches to center, and winged attendants / participants to the left, who similarly lean or reach to center, completing the great triangle that encompasses all of the figures. Gombrich was right, however, to retreat from the proposal of a theological significance to this similarity. Though Botticelli borrowed the traditional form of a Christian subject for his classically themed *Birth of Venus*, he did not invest his representation with any visual or conceptual incongruity, any impediment to the understanding of the classical subject as a coherent and successfully conveyed narrative. He did not, through the use of representational ambiguity, signal to the viewer that an allegorical interpretation was necessary, but allowed the classical subject to stand on its accord and with any significance that was its own.

Though Botticelli may have borrowed the composition of his *Birth of Venus* from the conventional representation of the Baptism of Christ, it was, nonetheless, a relatively

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<sup>22</sup> Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 218 n. 156.

<sup>23</sup> Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 218 n. 156.

straightforward and accurate illustration of Venus, newly born from sea foam and the severed genitals of Saturn, blown to shore by the winds and there met and clothed by one of the Horae. Venus, the primary subject of the painting, is portrayed as nude and standing in a pose that had been an attribute of Venus since Antiquity. There is nothing in this representation of Venus that interrupts or bars an understanding of her identity or is incongruous to the apparent narrative of the work. Excluding, perhaps, the female Breeze that is carried by the blowing Wind, there is nothing in the painting that was not also present in artistic precedents (i.e. the shell, the essential form of Venus) or in an available source text—the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite:

There [to Cyprus] the moist breath of the western wind wafted her over the waves of the loud-moaning sea in soft foam, and there the gold-filleted Horae welcomed her joyously. They clothed her with heavenly garments...<sup>24</sup>

Inasmuch as there is no representational ambiguity or incongruity, no interruption to the viewer's comprehension of the narrative and its participants, the painting permits a literal reading and does not necessitate an allegorical interpretation, though, admittedly, it does not preclude one either.

The 1492 inventory of the possessions of Lorenzo de' Medici included entries for two paintings by Botticelli, a *Pallas Athena* hung in the room of Lorenzo's eldest son, Piero, and a *Fortuna* described as a *sopracielo* over a bed in Piero's *antecamera*.<sup>25</sup> There

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<sup>24</sup> Homer *Hymns* 6, to Aphrodite. *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, (London: W. Heinemann and New York: The Macmillan Co., 1914). Regarding artistic precedents, see also the description of Apelles' *Aphrodite Anadyomene* in Pliny *Natural History* 35.1.86-87, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Marco Spallanzani and Giovanna Gaeta Bertelà, eds., *Libro di Inventario dei Beni di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Florence: Associazione Amici del Bargello, 1992), 80, 94. The *Pallas* was described on the manuscript folio 42v: "Uno panno in uno intavolato messo d'oro, alto br. 4 inchircha e largo br. 2, entrovi una ighura di Pa[llade] et con uno



is neither evidence, nor reason to believe that either of these figures, the Athena or the Fortuna, was depicted in an ambiguous representation or had any manner of classical / Judeo-Christian typology inherent in its presentation or significance. The *Pallas* was described in the inventory immediately preceding a helmet belonging to Piero on which was a depiction of *Pallas* modeled in relief.<sup>26</sup> Even as the virginal Pallas, Athena was a goddess of war, and her representation in Piero's *camera* in a Botticelli painting and on Piero's helmet suggests a totemic potency akin to that which was allowed to the pagan gods in the physical / astrological tradition described by Jean Seznec.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the *Fortuna*, mounted over Piero's bed as a *sopracielo*, could have been intended to exert a totemic force over the inhabitant, or inhabitants, of that bed. It is, of course, impossible to say what these works represented or how they may have functioned. It is possible, however, to propose that Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* functioned in such a role. This unorthodox proposal is, at the very least, conceivable. There is nothing in the *Birth of Venus* that explicitly requires an allegorical or typological interpretation. Given that the *Birth of Venus* is painted on linen, unlike the *Pallas* or the *Primavera*, it is even conceivable that the painting was originally suspended, like Piero's *Fortuna*, over a *letto* in a private, domestic setting, and conceivable that it was intended to exert a totemic force over the bed's inhabitant or inhabitants, inspiring them to pursue the actions properly associated with Venus, the goddess of Love. If this proposal is entirely

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schudo dandresse e una lancia d'archo di mano di Sandro di Botticello". The *Fortuna* was described under the rubric designating the *antichamera* of Piero, ms. folio 48: "Uno sopracielo a detto letto di detta antichamera, dipintovi una Fortuna, di mano di Sandro di Botticelli".

<sup>26</sup> Spallanzani and Bertelà, *Libro di Inventario*, 80: "Uno dono d'una giostra d'uno cimere in sun un elmetto con una figura di Pa[[lade] di rilievo e d'ariento".

<sup>27</sup> Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 37-83.

hypothetical and largely rhetorical, it is grounded in one of the more traditional beliefs regarding the nature of the pagan deities and the efficacy of their images, it explains the curious linen support of the *Birth of Venus*, and it interprets the work in one possible context. Such a setting and interpretation are conceivable, and this very fact reveals the significance of a literal representation of a pagan subject, rather than an ambiguous representation that draws from both the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions.

Attempts to interpret or explain the *Birth of Venus* will necessarily remain inconclusive. Like the bronze *David*, the *Birth of Venus* was unknown to the historical record for some decades after any likely date of its creation. It was first described by Vasari in 1550, in a troubled passage that succeeded only in placing the work in the Medici Villa at Castello at that particular date.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the work of art as it has been known to modern scholarship and as it is visible today is separated from the particulars of its creation, display, and earliest history, complicating any attempt to identify an intended audience or to reconstruct what perceived meaning the Venus may have had to the period eye or mind. Attempts at interpreting the work beyond a literal meaning are further complicated by the very fact that the *Birth of Venus* does not, in its particular representation, make necessary an allegorical interpretation or any reading other than the literal comprehension of its narrative. The work *could have been* intended as an allegorical representation, or *could have had* a significance beyond the literal rendition of a scene from classical mythology, but such an intention or significance would have depended on the perceptions of the audience or the particulars of context and display, rather than on any quality inherent in the representation itself.

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<sup>28</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 225.

Botticelli's *Primavera* (Figure 48) is deceptively similar to the *Birth of Venus* in certain particulars of its form and format. Both works are large-scale paintings of mythological subjects with a central figure who faces the viewer and assemblies of associated deities to either side.<sup>29</sup> In the operation of its representation, however, the *Primavera* is considerably closer to Donatello's bronze *David* than to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. The central figure of the *Primavera*, like David / Mercury, is presented without any readily identifiable attributes, stripped of those motifs which would make clear her identity, and given a form that is incongruous with the apparent narrative of the painting.

This representational ambiguity, together with the assumption that the *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus* were pendants, led Vasari to incorrectly identify the protagonist of the painting as Venus, an erroneous assertion that has confused modern scholarship until only very recently. The central figure of the *Primavera* is not, in fact, Venus, but Persephone, and the subject of the work her return from Hades, led by Mercury *Psychopompos* and the dancing Graces and accompanied by the transformation of Seasons at the warming breath of Zephyr.<sup>30</sup> Even when the true subject of the painting is recognized, however, incongruence remains, particularly in the form of the central figure, whose apparent pregnancy is not dictated by the source text, and in the presence of the

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<sup>29</sup> On the *Primavera* see Aby Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Spring" (1893), in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (Los Angeles, CA : Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999): 112-142; Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 31-81; Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960); Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 100-10.; and Charles Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). For a fuller description of relevant literature, see Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 37-39; Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Kline, "Botticelli's *Return of Persephone*: On the Source and Subject of the *Primavera*," forthcoming.

diminutive god of love, that Cupid who hovers over Persephone and also is not proscribed by the literary source which assembles the other participants in the vernal drama that is the *Primavera*. If these ambiguities and incongruences have confounded attempts at understanding the subject and significance of the *Primavera*, they also reveal the process by which the true subject and significance will be revealed. The representational ambiguities that characterize the *Primavera* signal the propriety, even the necessity of an allegorical interpretation of the figures and events depicted and an understanding of the perceived typology of pagan and Christian subjects that allows a dual identity of the central figure, who is Persephone *and* the Virgin Annunciate, both, simultaneously.

Because the central figure of the *Primavera* is represented without identifying attributes, the subject of the painting will not be understood through any method or study which first posits her identity, but through a careful consideration of the attendant figures, their forms and relations, and the cause of their assembly.<sup>31</sup> The various classical and Renaissance texts which have previously and frequently been proposed as sources for the *Primavera*—Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, Seneca’s *De Beneficiis*, Ovid’s *Fasti*, Horace’s *Odes*, and Poliziano’s *Stanze per la Giostra* and *Rusticus*—are actually relevant to the painted depiction only in very broad terms; Aby Warburg, who first proposed a relationship between these texts and the *Primavera*, did not posit a strictly causal or iconographic relationship, but an association of literary and pictorial modes.<sup>32</sup> If these texts do not accurately describe the figures and actions depicted in the *Primavera*, such a

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<sup>31</sup> This material is presented in greater detail in a forthcoming study by the author of this dissertation: Kline, “Botticelli’s *Return of Persephone*.”

<sup>32</sup> These texts, and others, were proposed by Aby Warburg, whose method was associative rather than iconographic. See Warburg’s own statement of methodology, Warburg, *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 89.

text does exist, and was known in the later Quattrocento among the intellectual circle of Florentine humanists and their Medici patrons. The *Orphic Hymns*, a collection of invocative prayers to the deities of the pagan pantheon, described the Horae, or Seasons, as playing or colluding with Persephone when she is led by the Graces from Hades to light, described Mercury in his role as *Psychopompos*, or guide of souls in Persephone's realm, and Zephyr as meadowy, vernal, and all-begetting.<sup>33</sup> In composing the *Primavera*, which is a representation of the advent of Spring, Botticelli drew from particular passages in the Orphic Hymn to the Seasons, the Hymn to Mercury, the Hymn to the Zephyrs, and the Hymn to Eros, and crafted from them an *invenzione* of the transformation of Winter into Spring at the warming breath of the West Wind and at the return of Persephone from Hades, lead by Mercury, Guide of Souls, and the Graces. The identification of this text as the source for the painting resolves certain issues that have remained problematic in scholarship and explains certain iconographic, compositional, and conceptual elements of the *Primavera*.<sup>34</sup> Even so, certain particulars of representation—the appearance of the central figure and the presence of Cupid—are not strictly proscribed by the source text and remain somewhat inexplicable or incongruous to the subject of the painting. The incongruity of the central figure does not reveal a flaw in the proposed interpretation, however, but suggests a dual identity of the protagonist, an inherent polysemaity akin to that of the bronze *David*, and like it dependent on the perception that a typology of classical and Judeo-Christian figures was both possible and significant.

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<sup>33</sup> On the *Orphic Hymns*, see Ilana Klutstein, *Marsilio Ficino et la Theologie Ancienne: Oracles Chaleaïques, Hymnes Orphiques, Hymnes de Proclus* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1987), 21-45, 55-110; Apostolos Athanassakis, *The Orphic Hymns: Text, Translation, and Notes* (Missoula, MN: Scholars Press for the Society of Biblical Literature, 1977). The Hymns to the Horae and Mercury referred to in the text are in Klutstein, *Marsilio Ficino et la Theologie Ancienne*, 86, 93-94.

<sup>34</sup> Kline, "Botticelli's *Return of Persephone*."

Just as scholars noted a similarity between the form or appearance of the bronze *David* and the typical depiction of the pagan god Mercury, so also have scholars noted a similarity of form or appearance between the central figure of the *Primavera* and the typical depiction of the Virgin Mary. Lionello Venturi described the figure as a Venus “conceived as a Madonna.”<sup>35</sup> Gombrich borrowed from Ficino a passage in which *Humanitas* was described as a “nymph of heavenly origin whom God exalts by His love” and, proposing that the central figure of the *Primavera* is a *Venus-Humanitas*, drew a conceptual parallel between the exalted nymph and the “handmaid of the Lord” who is exalted and a visual parallel between the *Primavera*’s protagonist and the Virgin Annunciate, giving as example and “spiritual sister” the Mary in Baldovinetti’s Uffizi *Annunciation*.<sup>36</sup> (Figure 50) Panofsky, in *Renaissance and Renascences*, wrote briefly of the morphological and spiritual relationship between the figure of the supposed Venus in the *Primavera* and the Mary Annunciate.<sup>37</sup>

The central figure of the *Primavera* is closer in appearance to the Marys painted by Botticelli and his contemporaries than to the artist’s depictions of the pagan goddesses Venus and Pallas Athena. Her pose, costume, and facial features are similar—vaguely or ambiguously so—to those of the Virgin in Botticelli’s own *Castello Annunciation* (Figure 49), and Baldovinetti’s Uffizi *Annunciation* (Figure 50), the example given by Gombrich. The central figure of the *Primavera*, like the Virgin Annunciate in these works and others, stands with her body turned toward the viewer, lifts her right hand upward, with

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<sup>35</sup> Leonello Venturi, *Botticelli* (Vienna: Phaidon Press and New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), 20.

<sup>36</sup> Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 62-63, pl. 38.

<sup>37</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 196.

fingers poised in a gesture of greeting or listening,<sup>38</sup> and tilts her head to that same side. She wears the traditional red and blue garments of the Virgin, though reversed—Mary most often wears a blue cloak over a red robe, while the *Primavera*'s figure wears a red cloak over a blue robe, an inversion that is not unknown to Marian iconography. Her personal appearance—hair and facial features—are as close or closer to any Botticelli Madonna as they are to his Athena in the *Pallas and the Centaur* or to either of the Venuses in the *Birth of Venus* or the *Venus and Mars*, and the gossamer veil that holds back her brown locks is similar to that worn by the Virgin, while all of these pagan goddesses wear their hair unbound.

Ultimately, however, this similarity is ambiguous. The figure in the *Primavera* is not the Virgin, or not represented in such a manner or in such a context that she could be interpreted only as the Virgin. The Virgin's appearance in the midst of easily recognizable pagan deities would indeed be incongruous. However, the similarity of appearance between this figure and the typical conventions of representing Mary is not without significance, in part because her particular representation does not exclude the possibility that she, like the bronze *David*, is both a pagan deity and a figure from the Judeo-Christian tradition, presented simultaneously as a synthesis of parallel types. She is not exclusively a Madonna, though she is closest in appearance to the Virgin. Neither is she exclusively any recognizable pagan goddess. She is so ambiguous in representation that her identity could be misunderstood for nearly five centuries, from Vasari to the scholars of the twentieth-century, who named her Venus not because of any inherent quality of the figure, herself, but from a perceived connection between this figure and those others closest to her—Cupid and the Graces—and a belief that these figures, as

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

attributes, proved her to be that goddess of Love. In fact, she is not Venus, but neither is she a recognizable Persephone. She lacks any motif or attribute which would reveal that identity—the pomegranate, perhaps, that doomed Persephone to Hades for a portion of each year. The consequences of this omission are profound: Botticelli prohibited the viewer from comprehending the identity of his central figure and from any easy recognition of the greater subject as a narrative scene, and required, instead, an interpretative response that pursues the allegorical significance of the central figure and of the *Primavera* as a whole. The similarity between this figure, who is surrounded by mythological figures and must, herself, be a mythological figure, and the Virgin Mary further signifies the manner or mode of allegory—i.e. that this is a typological synthesis of a pagan goddess and the Virgin Mary—and its relevance for the greater work of art—that the mythological event depicted must parallel an event or quality associated with Mary, or have been perceived to parallel an event or quality associated with Mary in the mind of the Renaissance observer.

The identification of the subject and source text for the *Primavera* as none other than Persephone and the *Orphic Hymns*, respectively, is of primary importance to the study of the typological significance of the painting. Not only does the Hymn to Persephone describe that goddess in terms that are similar to those used in the Middle Ages and Renaissance to describe the Virgin Mary, but the perceived author of the *Orphic Hymns* was believed to have been among those select poets and philosophers of the Greeks who were initiated into the mysteries of the Christian faith and incorporated Christian truth into their works, as allegories hidden beneath the veil of the literal sense.

The *Orphic Hymns* are a series of invocations to the various deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon, thought to have been written by the mythological Orpheus, though they were likely composed by an unknown author in the early centuries C.E. Each of the individual hymns calls forth a pagan deity by name, by descriptive epithets, and by poetic



pleas for the appearance of the deity before the devout initiate. The invocative mode of the text may have inspired the frontal pose and outward gaze of the central figure of the *Primavera*—Persephone stands before the viewer, hand raised in greeting, as if she has just revealed herself to the initiate—and may have inspired even her lack of interaction with the other figures—she is present in response to the viewer’s invocation, not as a participant in a narrative scene or subject. At first glance, however, her physical appearance does not seem to relate directly to the epithets that describe her in the Orphic Hymn. She is there described as *pulchricoma*, *pulchriformis*, *bene lucens*, *cornuta*, *verna*, and *sacrum manifestans corpus germinibus viridifructibus*—i.e. beautiful-haired, beautiful-formed, brilliant or shining, horned, vernal, and showing her holy body in germination and green fruits.<sup>39</sup> Though the *Primavera*’s Persephone is comely in her tresses and form, she is not particularly brilliant, is not particularly vernal, is not horned, and does not appear to show her holy body in germination or green fruits. Neither does her appearance correspond to those terms which place her in relation to other mythological figures who are not included in the *Primavera*—here, the passages which praise her as the greatly honored wife of Pluto or the mother of the Furies or of Eubouleos are of little significance. There is considerable significance to other terms, however. She is described as the *Horarum complicatrix*, or she-who-folds-together the Horae, which epithet may have contributed to the representation of the transformation of Seasons that is depicted to the right side of the *Primavera*. Persephone is also described in terms that have a distinctly Marian ring: she is *casta*, *vita datrix*, *subterrestrium regina*, *omnipotens*, *sola mortalibus desideranda*, *vita et mors sola mortalibus longe laboriosis*, *beata dea*, and *pace abundans et sanitate manus admovente mites et vita felici*

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<sup>39</sup> *Orphic Hymn* to Persephone. Klutstein, *Marsilio Ficino et la Theologie Ancienne*, 77-78. See Athanassakis’ translation of the Greek, Athanassakis, *Orphic Hymns*, 40-43.

*laetam senectutem deducenti ad tuam regionem, o regina*—pure, she who gives life, queen of the underworld, all powerful, only desire of mortals, life and death alone for long suffering mortals, blessed goddess, and she who “sends abundant peace, soft-handed health, and life happy and joyful to the old who are sent to your realm, O queen.”<sup>40</sup> These terms and descriptions are not explicitly Marian, but parallel Mary’s roles as Queen of Heaven, intercessor for mortal souls, and Blessed Virgin. Even the most descriptive passage of the Hymn to Persephone could find a parallel in Marian imagery, if the phrase *sacrum manifestans corpus germinibus viridifruitibus*—showing your holy body in germination and green fruits—could be understood as relating to Mary’s *fructus ventris*—the fruit of her womb—which is blessed by Elizabeth at the Visitation (Luke 1:42) and by pious Christians in every recitation of the *Ave Maria*. If the figure of Persephone in the *Primavera* is a typological representation of Persephone and Mary simultaneously, she may show her sacred body as rich in fruit—the *fructibus abundans* described elsewhere in the Hymn to Persephone—through the apparent fullness of the figure’s womb—the exterior sign of Mary’s *fructus ventris*.

The Renaissance belief that the author of the *Orphic Hymns* was none other than the mythological Orpheus is likely to have contributed to a perception that the description of Persephone in that text contained or hid a typological gloss on the Virgin Mary, thus allowing a typological presentation of Persephone / Mary in the *Primavera*. A late Quattrocento belief in the *prisca theologia*, championed by Marsilio Ficino, who translated the *Orphic Hymns* for Cosimo de’ Medici, placed Orpheus in a lineage of classical poets and philosophers who were believed to have been instructed in the knowledge and mysteries of Christianity, even before the advent of Christ, and to have

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<sup>40</sup> Klutstein, *Marsilio Ficino et la Theologie Ancienne*, 77-78; Athanassakis, *Orphic Hymns*, 40-43.

incorporated elements of this Truth into their written works, where it lay hidden beneath the literal level of narrative, invocation, or philosophical treatise. Orpheus was believed to have been among the earliest of these *prisci theologii*, or ancient theologians. Ficino lists Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus as his predecessors, and Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato as his theological descendants.<sup>41</sup> Inasmuch as Orpheus, the supposed author of the *Orphic Hymns*, was believed to have known Christian truths, his description of Persephone could have been perceived as a veiled gloss on Mary, and a painting such as the *Primavera*, which is based on the description of gods and goddesses in the *Orphic Hymns*, the invocative mode of the *Orphic Hymns*, and the association of particular deities who, according to the *Orphic Hymns*, are involved in the return of spring at Persephone's return from Hades, may also be a typological depiction of Mary and her participation in the advent of spring.

Parallels between the seasonal and liturgical calendars may also have contributed to the perception that Persephone and Mary were types. The season of spring properly begins at the vernal equinox, occurring on the 22nd or 23rd of March, within days of Florentine New Year, March 25th. The 25th was also celebrated as the feast day of the Annunciation to Mary, at which time, according to Christian doctrine, the Virgin conceived or became fruitful. Thus, the year was renewed and the seasons changed when Persephone returned from Hades *and / or* when Jesus was conceived at the Annunciation to Mary. Both events marked an instance of renewal or rebirth—Persephone's return brought the transformation of barren winter into flowering spring; the Annunciation to Mary and her conception at that event marked the change of religious eras, from the period of the Law to that of Grace. In that vein, the transforming Horae in the *Primavera*, i.e. the figures of Winter and Spring, could, conceivably, find a parallel in the Christian

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<sup>41</sup> Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 742, 881 n. 57.

personifications of Synagogue and Ecclesia. Though the Horae in the *Primavera* are not invested with characteristics or motifs that specifically recall those other figures, they could have been perceived or recognized as types for Synagogue and Ecclesia by an informed viewer. Such an interpretation would have been in keeping with the themes of renewal or rebirth that are represented in the *Primavera* and with the typology that underlies the dual identity of the central figure.

The particulars of Florentine devotion to Mary may also have played into the typological presentation of Persephone / Mary in the *Primavera*. In 1296 the dedication of the Florence cathedral was shifted from St. Reparata to Santa Maria del Fiore—Saint Mary of the Flowers. The dedication was reinforced by a vote of the Florentine councils of the Popolo and Commune in 1412 and the decree of the priors of the Signoria, at which time the feast of the Annunciation, on March 25th, was established as the principal holy day of the cathedral.<sup>42</sup> Though the celebration of the feast of the Annunciation was later restored exclusively to the Servite Friars of SS. Annunziata, the dedication of the Duomo remained to Santa Maria del Fiore.<sup>43</sup> This particularly Florentine vision or conception of the Virgin could relate not only to the images of Mary holding a lily and the flowering reliefs on the Duomo's *cantorie* by Donatello and Luca della Robbia, as Mary Bergstein has suggested,<sup>44</sup> but also to the perception of a typological parallel between Maria del Fiore and Persephone, goddess of the spring, who is, in the *Primavera*, surrounded by a great number of blooms.

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<sup>42</sup> Mary Bergstein, "Marian Politics in Quattrocento Florence: The Renewed Dedication of Santa Maria del Fiore in 1412," *Renaissance Quarterly* 44:4 (winter 1991), 673-75.

<sup>43</sup> Bergstein, "Marian Politics," 704-5.

<sup>44</sup> Bergstein, "Marian Politics," 704-16.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which the particulars of the *Primavera* are dependent on its typological message. One could imagine or interpret the figures of the Horae to be types for Synagogue and Ecclesia, Persephone as Maria Annunciata, Mercury (the messenger god) a type for Gabriel (God's messenger), and the Graces as a figural manifestation of the *gratia* that is part of Gabriel's salutation to Mary and which, in some Gothic depictions, is literally written in the space between those two figures.<sup>45</sup> Zephyr, *spiritus qui spirat*, is a parallel to the Holy Spirit, *Sanctus Spiritus*, and his causal participation in the transformation of the Seasons suggests the action of the latter in the shift from the period of Mosaic Law to that of Christian Grace. Even Cupid finds a place in this scheme: the diminutive pagan god of love could stand in for the Christian God, who is Love and who appears in certain Gothic Annunciations as a flying *homunculus*.<sup>46</sup> Admittedly, some of these connections or connotations are tenuous, at best, and it must be stated that, with the notable exception of the central figure, the forms and actions of the figures in the *Primavera* appear to derive from a relatively close reading of the pagan source text, the *Orphic Hymns*, rather than from any conventions of Christian representation. Mercury, for example, looks and acts like the *Psychopompos*, rather than any Christian angel, and the Graces take their place in the composition and the particulars of their form from the literary and artistic conventions of representing the Graces. These figures are not ambiguous in their representation. The central figure is, however, and signifies through her representational ambiguity the propriety of an allegorical interpretation of her identity and of the subject of the greater work of art.

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<sup>45</sup> See, as example, Simone Martini's *Annunciation* altarpiece, now in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

<sup>46</sup> See, as example, Robert Campin's triptych of the *Annunciation*, now in the Cloisters collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

It remains to determine the ultimate significance of Botticelli's use of typology, the very meaning of his *Primavera* and the reason for depicting Persephone as a typological figure of Mary. The perceived parallels between Persephone and Mary make possible such a depiction, but do not elucidate Botticelli's intentions in crafting such a figure. The mere depiction of types is not the ultimate function of typological allegory, but it exists, or is perceived to exist, for the purpose of revealing deeper truths of the Christian faith. Thus, there is little to be gained or conveyed from the simple statement that Persephone is a type to Mary. There is a greater relevance in the possibility that the scene surrounding Persephone is intended as a gloss on Mary, that the transforming figures of Winter and Spring are intended as types for Synagogue and Ecclesia, and that in pairing this change of Seasons with the advent of spring the painting seeks to establish also that the change of religious eras occurred at the parallel moment, the Annunciation to the Virgin. The figures of Ecclesia and Synagogue appear more frequently in medieval art in association with the Crucifixion, for the Bible text specifies that at the moment of Jesus' death on the Cross the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51), the literal destruction of the Old Law which is symbolically represented in the figure of Synagogue bent and broken next to the Cross—see, as examples, the well known illustration from the Psalter of Blanche of Castille and the *Crucifixion* panel in pot metal glass from the ambulatory of St. Etienne, Bourges.<sup>47</sup> Later medieval and Renaissance art and theology did not restrict the association of Ecclesia and Synagogue to the Crucifixion, however, but connected these figures also with Mary. Thus, Thomas

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<sup>47</sup> The Psalter of Blanche of Castille is Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS. 1186. The pot metal glass panel from St. Etienne, Bourges, is reproduced in Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Thirteenth Century: A Study of Medieval Iconography and Its Sources* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 195 fig. 131. Ecclesia and Synagogue were described in association with the Crucifixion in Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, Janet Seligman trans. (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1972) 2:110-12, and in Mâle, *Religious Art in France*, 192-99.

Aquinas described Mary as the boundary between the Old and the New Law.<sup>48</sup> The iconographers and sculptors of Strasbourg Cathedral placed Ecclesia and Synagogue on the jambs of the south portal, beneath depictions of the Death and Coronation of the Virgin, thereby associating the establishment of the New Law with Mary's establishment in Heaven. Giotto may have glossed the Annunciation as a boundary between the Old and New Law, if Laurine Bongiorno's interpretation of changes in the depiction of architectural elements in the Arena Chapel frescoes is correct.<sup>49</sup> Later Renaissance *tondi* by Signorelli and Michelangelo may present similar themes, if the presence of nudes and poses taken directly from classical sculpture signifies an ancient period or religious era, John the Baptist the period of Old or Mosaic Law, and the Madonna and Child the new period or era of Grace. Botticelli's *Primavera* may join these works as a gloss or comment on the role of Mary in the establishment of a new era at the passing of the old, if the transformation of Winter into Spring at the return of Persephone can be seen as a typological representation of the transformation of Synagogue into Ecclesia at the Annunciation. In such a reading, Botticelli's use of typology is not simply noted, but explained—his *Primavera* is an allegorical depiction of the advent of spring at the return of Persephone from Hades, but finds its deeper meaning and significance in the implicit message that the Old Law was fulfilled, transformed into the New Law, at the moment of Mary's conception at the Annunciation. This perception or belief is not strictly Biblical, not implicit in the Gospel narrative, but revealed through the typological parallels between Persephone and Mary and between the advent of spring and the advent of Ecclesia.

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Aquinas *Commentum in quattuor libros sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi* 4.30.2.1. This was observed in Laurine Mack Bongiorno, "The Theme of the Old and the New Law in the Arena Chapel," *Art Bulletin* 50:1 (March 1968), 12 n. 18.

<sup>49</sup> Bongiorno, "Theme of the Old and the New Law," 12.

Thus, the representational ambiguity of the *Primavera*'s central figure is key to the interpretation of the painting's meaning. Through the ambiguity of the central figure, the artist signaled the necessity of an allegorical interpretation. Because the ambiguity inherent in the figure draws from the pagan and Judeo-Christian traditions or conventions, specifically, the viewer is led to the understanding of an inherent typology and is ultimately led to pursue the typological significance not only of the central figure, but of the greater work—the very reason for a typological representation, which is to gloss a doctrine or belief that is essentially extra-Biblical. The method gleaned from Origen's practice here proves most fruitful.

#### Epilogue: Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and Representational Clarity

If the method here employed reveals the *Birth of Venus* to be without any considerable degree of ambiguity in the represented narrative, that painting is nevertheless highly significant to the studies of Renaissance typology and the Renaissance response to classical antiquity. The *Birth of Venus* is among those first paintings of the Italian Renaissance that reintegrated pagan subject with pagan form. The *Birth of Venus* is significant in the development of Renaissance painting precisely because it did not bring together elements drawn from the pagan and Judeo-Christian elements, unlike late medieval and earlier Renaissance representations of pagan subjects, which tended to portray classical figures and events in contemporary forms, or the those contemporary works like the bronze *David* or the artists' own *Primavera*, which drew variously from both traditions in order to convey a typological or syncretic message. Given Botticelli's use of representational ambiguity in the *Primavera*, revealing his knowledge of this artistic trope and its significance with regard to the viewer's response, it seems possible, even likely that the artist choose to represent the Venus of his other



painting with a strict representational clarity in order to avoid the typological connotations that are implicit in ambiguous works.

Panofsky described the medieval tendency to separate pagan form and subject in his “principle of disjunction,” stating that “wherever in the high and later Middle Ages a work of art borrows its form from a classical model, this form is almost invariably invested with a non-classical, normally Christian, significance; wherever in the high and later Middle Ages a work of art borrows its theme from classical poetry, legend, history or mythology, this theme is quite invariably presented in a non-classical, normally contemporary form.”<sup>50</sup> The reasons for this “disjunction” were, for Panofsky, rooted in a perception that the medieval mind sensed a continuity between the classical era and its own and was thus unable to look objectively on the remains of the classical past or to reconstruct its literary or artistic product in a true or archaeological manner.<sup>51</sup> Further, Panofsky argued that the medieval mind, under the influence of scholasticism, tended to compartmentalize psychological experiences and cultural activities, apparently including the forms and subjects of Antiquity, and drew piecemeal from the wealth of the classical remains.<sup>52</sup> The Renaissance, however, was for Panofsky a period of “decompartmentalization” and intercultural fusion under the influence of that great syncretic movement, Neo-Platonism.<sup>53</sup> Panofsky’s Renaissance was an era entirely apart from the continuity of Antiquity and Middle Ages and able to look with nostalgia on the great civilizations that had been Greece and Rome. Thus the mind of the Renaissance, as

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<sup>50</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations*, 84.

<sup>51</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations*, 111-13.

<sup>52</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations*, 106.

<sup>53</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations*, 183.

Panofsky would have put it, could reconstruct and properly apply the aesthetic of the classical era, because it perceived a distance between its own culture and that of Antiquity and was, at the same time, aided by a unifying philosophical system and driven by a great yearning for the true forms of the ancient past.<sup>54</sup> Panofsky's system is well and poetically summarized in portions of the closing paragraph of his second chapter: "The Middle Ages had left antiquity unburied and alternately galvanized and exorcised its corpse. The Renaissance stood weeping at its grave and tried to resurrect its soul. And in one fatally auspicious moment it succeeded."

While there aspects of Panofsky's proposed system that are to be admired, the evidence here provided suggests an entirely different understanding of the medieval and Renaissance perceptions of cultural continuity and difference with regard to the classical era. If medieval authorities expressed a distance between the authority and polysemitry of the Bible and classical texts, the relative insignificance of classical subjects relegates them to representation in a foreign aesthetic—i.e. because classical subjects were not able to convey any significant meaning other the (perceived) fallacy of their literal narrative or the possible moral content that is their permitted allegorical significance, they did not significantly impact the aesthetic of the period, which was crafted in response to the doctrinal and philosophical systems of Christianity, and were subject instead to its forms and purposes. Here, the perceived distance between the two periods, classical and medieval, was perhaps the result of an egocentric hierarchy and, in turn, brought about the phenomenon in which the culture of (perceived) lesser importance was relegated to the status of Other. The changes in the perceived significance of extra-Biblical texts that characterize the Italian Trecento, such that these were allowed the same allegorical significances that had previously been read only in the Biblical narrative, show that the

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<sup>54</sup> Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 112-13.

Italian Renaissance found and celebrated a perceived continuity between the classical and Christian cultures that was absent in the medieval period. The perception of significant and meaningful (Christian) content in classical subjects and a continuity of (Christian) culture between the classical and contemporary periods allowed the typological form of the bronze *David* and the typological form and content of the *Primavera* and necessitated the reintegration of classical form and subject in the *Birth of Venus* for the sole purpose of avoiding the representational ambiguity that characterized those other works and the implicit typology that is signified by that ambiguity—i.e. in the *Birth of Venus*, Botticelli presented a classical subject in its classical form because the representation of a classical subject in contemporary (Christian) form had become an artistic trope used to signify to the viewer the presence of an inherent allegorical meaning and a perceived typology between the subject and a parallel Christian subject or narrative. Thus, Renaissance artists reintegrated classical form and subject not simply because of a cultural interest *all'antiqua*, a new availability of classical texts, or a perceived distance from the classical period, but in reaction to the new sense that certain classical subjects were potent or significant in a Christian context. Thus, works like the *Birth of Venus* reintegrated classical form and subject to avoid a typological interpretation, to retain their literal, moral, or physical significance. Thus, the great reintegration of classical form and subject, celebrated by Panofsky as a sign of the one true Renaissance, was reactionary and opposed to the uniquely Renaissance response to antiquity, which was syncretic and unifying and produced those other, typological works—the *David*, the *Primavera*, and any others like them. Unlike the *Birth of Venus*, these could only have been produced in such a period.



Figure 43 – Donatello, *David*, bronze, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence



Figure 44 – Donatello, *David*, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence



Figure 45 – “*Farnese Hermes*,” 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. Roman statue after a Greek, Praxitelean original, British Museum, London

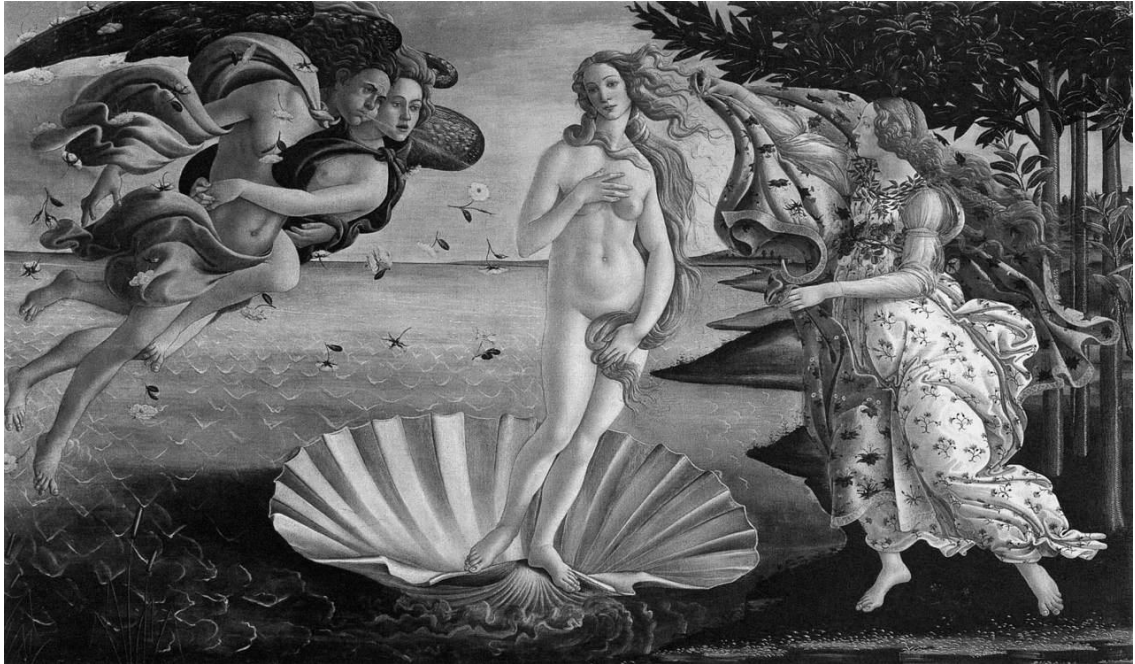


Figure 46 – Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



Figure 47 – Alessio Baldovinetti, *Baptism of Christ*, Museo di San Marco, Florence



Figure 48 – Botticelli, *Primavera*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence





49 - Botticelli, *Castello Annunciation*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



50 – Alessio Baldovinetti, *Annunciation*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

## CHAPTER 4

THE *PRISCI THEOLOGII* IN EARLY RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY AND ART

It is shown, in the preceding chapters, that certain Italian poets and philosophers of the Tre- and Quattrocento professed a belief that extra-Biblical texts could be interpreted typologically or anagogically, and that Christian “truth” lay hidden even in the allegorical meaning of the narrative of classical mythology. Intimately intertwined with this belief, as it developed, was a belief also that the authors of these texts were, like the authors of the Bible narrative, inspired by the Christian God to hide or communicate Christian “truth” in the typological or anagogical meaning of their works. Indeed, these two beliefs or perceptions can not be separated. Classical mythology and philosophy, in certain particular instances, expressed ideas or beliefs that were similar to Christian doctrine, or, at the very least, could be viewed as harmonious with the tenants of the Christian religion. The earliest Apologists and Church Fathers explained these either as instances of accidental and unwitting veracity or as borrowings from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, for Clement and Augustine, the classical author of a mythological text was either entirely erroneous, or, inasmuch as he expressed ideas harmonious with Christian belief, ignorant of the truth within his own work and of the true Author from whence it came, or a thief of that truth, having stolen from those who were rightly given

revelation from the Divine.<sup>1</sup> Renaissance poets and philosophers pursued, instead, an alternate explanation that had never been fully explored by the theologians of earlier periods—that classical authors had been divinely inspired theologians, fully aware of the Christian truths hidden in the allegorical meaning of their works, and willing participants, initiates, even, into the Christian tradition, broadly conceived, rather than outsiders and interlopers.

Like other beliefs or perceptions, the concept of ancient poets and philosophers as *true* theologians changed over time and was variously expressed from the early Trecento to the late Quattrocento, depending on the individual proponent and his place in the development of the idea. To be sure, the idea that poets were theologians had a more ancient pedigree, dating back to Antiquity and finding expression throughout the Middle Ages. Thus Isidore of Seville followed Suetonius in giving the origins of poetry to humanity's desire to praise and describe the gods.<sup>2</sup> There existed also from Antiquity the claim that poets were divinely inspired—thus Plato in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Ion*.<sup>3</sup> It remained to the Renaissance humanists, however, to marry these ideas together and to Christianity and to claim both the divine inspiration of poets, even pagan poets, by the

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<sup>1</sup> Clement *Stromata* 1 refers to pagan philosophers as “thieves and robbers. See also Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 2:40.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (New York, Bollingen Foundation, Inc., 1953), 219. See also Isidore of Seville *Etymologies* 7.7.2: on Poets: “Therefore, just as they made temples more beautiful than their homes, and idols larger than their bodies, so they thought the gods should be honored by speech that was, as it were, loftier, and they raised up their praises with more brilliant words and more pleasing rhythms.” As in Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen Barney, W. Lewis, J. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 180.

<sup>3</sup> Plato *Phaedrus* 245; Plato *Ion* 534c.

Christian God or Godhead and, correspondingly, the status of poets, even “pagan” poets, as theologians within the greater Christian tradition.

The Renaissance concepts of *theologicae poetae*—theological poets—and *prisci theologii*—ancient theologians—are known to modern scholarship and were discussed most thoroughly by Ernst Curtius and Charles Trinkaus, respectively.<sup>4</sup> In his study of Latin literature from the European Middle Ages, Curtius sought the place of poetry, as he phrased it, “in the intellectual cosmos of the Middle Ages.”<sup>5</sup> In respective chapters, he examined the relationships, as they were perceived by poets and philosophers of Late Antiquity and throughout the medieval period, between poetry and philosophy and poetry and theology. Curtius discoursed on allegory and its role in Alexandrian and medieval syncretism, the Late Antique and Early Christian responses to Greek philosophy, the debate between late medieval Scholastics and early humanists over the theological nature of poetry, and, in a brief excursus, on the poet’s divine frenzy, all topics that have relevance to the present study.<sup>6</sup> Curtius’ treatment of poetic theology is of particular significance to the study of Renaissance beliefs regarding the status of classical poets and philosophers relative to their Christian counterparts. Curtius contrasted the views of Albertino Mussato, a poet of the Italian Trecento who espoused the ideas that poetry was divinely inspired and that the poets of Antiquity wrote as theologians and prophets of God, with the views of his correspondent, Fra Giovanino of Mantua, a Dominican friar

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<sup>4</sup> Curtius, *European Literature*; Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, (London: Constable & Co, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> Curtius, *European Literature*, 480.

<sup>6</sup> Curtius, *European Literature*, 203-27, 474-75.

who refuted Mussato's claims and maintained that poetry was a human invention and therefore both distinct from theology and beneath it as a learned pursuit.<sup>7</sup> Two points, in particular, may be drawn from Curtius' commentary on the epistolary communication between these two men and on the subtleties of their respective arguments. Curtius was careful to note that Mussato's claims were not entirely new to literary theory, that Mussato drew from medieval and Late Antique precedents.<sup>8</sup> Though he did not fully pursue the significance of the statement, Curtius also noted Fra Giovanino's willingness to admit that ancient poets were philosophers and had they, in their poems, had treated of things divine. "But," Fra Giovanino wrote, "since they were treating of false gods, they could not have transmitted the true theology."<sup>9</sup> These two points reveal at once the humanist method, which was revolutionary not as a practice of crafting new ideas from whole cloth, as it were, but in significantly expanding the application of ideas already current in the preceding period, and the very element or aspect which distinguished the view of classical poetry held by certain Renaissance poets and philosophers from that of their brethren, as it were, in all preceding periods—that medieval and Late Antique authorities, though they may have believed in or acknowledged the tradition of divinely inspired poets, did not view these poets as inspired by the Christian God, and therefore denied their authority as *true* theologians in the Christian sense. Explicit in the correspondence between Mussato and Fra Giovanino, and implicit in Curtius' study of that episode, is one essential difference between the medieval and Renaissance beliefs on

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<sup>7</sup> Curtius, *European Literature*, 215-16.

<sup>8</sup> Curtius, *European Literature*, 219.

<sup>9</sup> Curtius, *European Literature*, 216.

poetry and on the nature of the classical poets. Medieval theologians may have recognized a long-standing belief in the divine inspiration of poets and may have allowed that the poets of Antiquity wrote or sang of theological matters, yet they maintained that these poets, because they were not inspired by the Christian God and because they wrote, in the literal sense, of false gods, were not *true*, Christian theologians. Renaissance poets and philosophers, however, developed a system of belief in which their classical counterparts were increasingly viewed as divinely inspired by God—the Christian God—and, as true theologians, were believed to have been able to describe and reveal even the mysteries of the Christian faith in the allegories which, in their works, lay hidden beneath the veil of the literal sense.

Charles Trinkaus, in his study of Renaissance philosophy, reviewed and expanded upon the developments described by Curtius.<sup>10</sup> Trinkaus, like Curtius, described the place of poetry and allegory in early humanist thought, and he drew specific attention to the humanists' use of allegorical interpretation as a means of reconciling the apparently disparate traditions and narratives of the classical and Judeo-Christian cultures and thereby legitimizing the Renaissance interest in *res antiqua*.<sup>11</sup> Building on the foundation laid by Curtius, Trinkaus then mapped the development of the humanist belief in *theologica poetica*—theological poetics—and the corresponding concept of the *prisci poetae*—the ancient poets—as theologians, as these concepts were expanded in the later Renaissance into the theories of the *theologica platonica*—platonic theology—and the *prisci theologii*—the ancient theologians—which concepts counted both the classical

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<sup>10</sup> Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*.

poets and their intellectual or enlightened heirs, the classical philosophers, among the true theologians. This latter theory depended not only on a perceived harmony between the philosophical systems of classical philosophers and the doctrines of the Christian faith or on a discovery of perceived similarities in the theories of Plato and the tenants of Christianity, but, as it was expressed both in the writings of the Renaissance philosophers and in Trinkaus' study, on a belief that the classical philosophers had obtained "true" knowledge from the poets.<sup>12</sup>

In the material that he presented and in the very structure of his discourse, Trinkaus made clear that the humanists of the Tre- and Quattrocento developed the concepts of *theologica poetica* and *prisca theologia* over the course of centuries. Thus, the theories and philosophies of Petrarch and Boccaccio were not those of Caldiera, Landino, Ficino, or Pico, all of whom were discussed individually within Trinkaus' study.<sup>13</sup> There emerges, from Trinkaus' study, a nuanced recognition that the various humanist poets and philosophers of the long Renaissance each viewed the relationship of poetry, philosophy, and theology in his own way, though there does seem to have been a general trend, with each generation of philosophers and philosophies, toward greater syncretism. It is possible, therefore, and necessary to distinguish certain characteristics of the philosophies of Giovanni Caldiera and Marsilio Ficino from those of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. If Caldiera and Ficino, both and variously, espoused the idea of *theologicae poetae*, both also sought to maintain the superiority of the Judeo-Christian tradition over

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<sup>11</sup> Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 2:683-89, and particularly 2:687-88.

<sup>12</sup> Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 2:714-15, 2:721, 2:735-36, 2:741-42.

<sup>13</sup> Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 2:683-760 (chapters 15 and 16).



that of the pre-Advent *theologii*, even if they admitted these, albeit in a limited fashion, into the mysteries of the Christian faith. Thus, for example, although Caldiera allowed that the gentiles may have known, from the poets, the mystery of the Trinity, he maintained that they saw the splendor of the triune God obscurely, as if through a cloud, while the Christians, themselves, were able to more clearly distinguish the fullness of the Christian Godhead.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Ficino, though he believed firmly that the poets and philosophers of Ancient Greece were theologians in the Christian tradition and initiates into the divine mysteries of the Christian faith, wrote also that the “true” knowledge of the ancient theologians originated from contact with Moses or Mosaic text and was borrowed, even usurped, from the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>15</sup> Only in Pico’s writing are these distinctions absent. In the *De hominis dignitate*, Pico wrote of parallel traditions of secret knowledge, known respectively to the classical and Jewish traditions, and passed verbally from generation to generation by select initiates.<sup>16</sup> Though he did, at one point in the *De hominis dignitate*, describe knowledge as flowing “from the East to the Greeks and from the Greeks to us,” he did not elsewhere elaborate or otherwise specify a Jewish

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<sup>14</sup> Caldiera *On the Concord of the Poets, Philosophers, and Theologians*, as quoted and described in Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 707.

<sup>15</sup> Ficino *De Religione Christina*, as in Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 742.

<sup>16</sup> Pico *De hominis dignitate*, in Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus*, trans. Charles Wallis, Paul Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1940), 29-30: “...Moses on the mountain received from God not only the law, which, as written down in five books, he left to posterity, but also a more secret and true interpretation of the law. But God commanded him to publish the law indeed to the people, yet not to pass on in writing the interpretation of the law, or to make it generally known, but to reveal it himself under a great holy seal of silence to Jesus Nave alone, and afterwards he to the other high priests succeeding him.... The ancient philosophers observed this custom very faithfully.”

origin for the enlightenment of the *prisci theologii*, and, inasmuch as he contrasted the “Mosaic and Christian mysteries” with the “theology of the ancients,” he implied that these were distinct and that each of these traditions—gentile, Jewish, and Christian—was uniquely informed by the Divine.<sup>17</sup>

The development of the Renaissance beliefs that classical poets were *theologicae poetae* and that the Greek philosophers were *prisci theologii* in the Christian tradition is expressed not only in the writing of the Tre- and Quattrocento humanists, but also in the art of those centuries and in the early decades of the Cinquecento. The series of portraits of poets, both classical and Christian, in the decoration of the socle of the Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral depends on and communicates the idea that these authors were divinely inspired and that they, as true theologians, included elements of Christian truth in their writing, such that scenes and subjects drawn from their texts could be used to gloss the developing doctrine of Purgatory. Though Botticelli’s *Primavera* does not, in its own representation, depict the author of its subject, its representation and meaning depend on the contemporary perception that the author, the pseudo-historical Orpheus, was one of the divinely inspired *theologicae poetae*, and that he glossed or revealed Christian doctrine in the typological allegories hidden within his hymns to the deities of the classical pantheon.

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding the “flow of knowledge,” see Pico *De hominis dignitate*, as in Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 755-56. See also Pico *De hominis dignitate*, in Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, 13: “But in truth, not only the Mosaic or Christian mysteries but also the theology of the ancients show the advantages for us and the dignity of these liberal arts about which I have come here to dispute.”

Documentary evidence shows that Signorelli began the decoration of the socle of the Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral in 1502 and suggests that the program of decoration that was to fill that particular space had not been determined even until that date.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, nothing entirely like the Cappella Nova's poet series appears in Renaissance art until the Cinquecento, though pagan figures did appear in the art of the preceding centuries. Pagan poets and philosophers were represented in the art of the Tre- and Quattrocento either as men of particular accomplishment or moral virtue or, in certain rare and notable instances, as participants in the theological tradition which includes the *prisci theologici*, the Jewish patriarchs, and the Christian Apostles and Evangelists, alike. Yet even in these latter examples, when, in the Tre- and Quattrocento, artists and iconographers depicted a classical poet or philosopher as a theologian within a sacred context or in juxtaposition with figures from the Judeo-Christian tradition, a certain distinction was made between pagans and Judeo-Christians, conveying in visual form the philosophical or religious belief that the *prisci theologii*, though enlightened or initiated into the mysteries of the Christian faith, saw obscurely what was clear to God's Chosen People. This distinction was not made in the art of the Cinquecento, in Signorelli's frescoes on the socle of the Cappella Nova in Orvieto Cathedral or in Raphael Sanzio's fresco decoration of the Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura. The representation of classical poets and philosophers as theologians in these later works is not without precedent, as the evidence of the earlier works will attest, but the fresco

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<sup>18</sup> Sara Nair James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto: Liturgy, Poetry and a Vision of the End-Time* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2003), 78.

cycles of the Quattrocento may be shown to represent a further stage in the development of the idea of *prisci theologii* and to respectively depend on and convey a belief in the theological status of Ancient poets and philosophers that is a great deal closer to Pico's concept of the idea than that of any of his predecessors.

#### Pagan Philosophers and *Prisci Theologii* in the Art of the Early Renaissance

Two of the images described in the first chapter of this study, the Trecento *St. Augustine in Triumph* fresco from the church of St. Andrea in Ferrara (fig. 1) and the contemporary manuscript illumination of the same subject (fig. 2), present Judeo-Christian theologians and pagan philosophers in marked juxtaposition. In these images, the accompanying text draws a clear distinction between the theologians and philosophers—the authors of scripture, alone, were completely without error, while the philosophers, if they had spoken truthfully, possessed that truth unlawfully. The distinction between the two disparate pursuits is also represented spatially in the composition of each work of art—the theologians sit at Augustine's right hand, the philosophers to his left. These are not Last Judgment scenes, however, and the pagan philosophers, though they sit on the sinister side of the enthroned Augustine, are not, in these works, consigned to Hell. Though their position was not as honored or respected as their Judeo-Christian counterparts, the pagan philosophers were, in the particular instance of the Ferrara fresco, painted high on the wall of the chapel of Sant'Agostino in the Church of Sant'Andrea. Though classical, these figures were given a place within the Christian Church, both literally and figuratively speaking.

A similar statement of the relative worth of classical philosophy and Christian theology was represented in a contemporary panel painting originally made to decorate an altar dedicated to St. Thomas in the church of Santa Caterina in Pisa.<sup>19</sup> Though the painting is still displayed in that church, it is no longer associated with an altar and instead hangs as on the north wall of the nave.<sup>20</sup> The titular saint of the altar, St. Thomas Aquinas, is the primary subject of the altarpiece. (Figure 51) Aquinas is depicted as if enthroned and in glory, with Jesus above him in the pinnacle of the irregularly shaped panel and six Judeo-Christian theologians—Moses, Paul, and the four Evangelists—hovering three to a side in the space above Thomas and below Jesus. Each theologian is nimbed, invested with an identifying attribute, and holding tablets (Moses) or a book open with its pages turned toward Aquinas. Rays of gold descend from Jesus and from the writings of the theologians to cross Aquinas' own halo and reach his head, thus connecting the source of Aquinas' inspiration—the Divine Author and the works of the Bible—with the seat of his own intellect. Aquinas receives inspiration also from two other figures who stand below him on registers that project out, in front of the great golden halo that surrounds the Saint. These figures, identified by inscriptions as Aristotle, to the left, and Plato, to the right, hold their books open and turned upward toward Aquinas, and golden rays ascend from these open books to the Saint's head. Aquinas, in turn, faces directly forward and holds open a book that is turned toward the viewer, with a passage

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Polzer, "The Triumph of Thomas Panel in Santa Caterina, Pisa: Meaning and Date," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 37:1 (1993), 29-70.

<sup>20</sup> The author found the panel hanging on the north wall of the nave in the summer of 2004.

from the Biblical book of Proverbs legible on its pages: *Veritatem meditabitur guttur meum et labia mea detestabuntur impiu[m]*—“My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness.”<sup>21</sup> Four other books lie open on his lap. Two can be identified by the text written on their pages—one gives the opening of Genesis, the other the initial lines of Peter Lombard’s *Sententiarum Quattuor Libri*.<sup>22</sup> The remaining two books bear only a pseudo-script and no real text. Golden rays emanating from the book held in Aquinas’s hands signify the glory of his work—presumably his *Summa contra gentiles*, which opens with the text from Proverbs, and not the Bible, itself—and descend on crowds of monks, friars, and ecclesiasts below, thus completing the flow of wisdom, which originates both in heaven and on earth, is channeled through the titular saint of both chapel and altarpiece, and descends ultimately from his work to his brethren and intellectual descendents.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, this particular representation does honor Aristotle and Plato—here they stand to either side of a Christian altarpiece, here they offer their work to St. Thomas, and, inasmuch as the rays that ascend from their books reach his head, he accepts their offerings and shows them to be useful to the Christian theologian. The same is not true for all philosophers—the Arabic philosopher Ibn Roschd, or Averroes, is

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<sup>21</sup> Proverbs 8:7. Polzer transcribed and identified the inscription and noted also that the passage opens Aquinas’ *Summa contra gentiles*. Polzer, “Triumph of Thomas Panel,” 37.

<sup>22</sup> Polzer transcribed the text of each and identified the passage from Genesis, but did not know the origin of the inscription on the pages of the latter book, here identified. Polzer, “Triumph of Thomas Panel,” 38-39.

<sup>23</sup> Polzer identified the rays and their interconnected pattern as the stepped descent of knowledge, which, he said, is the central theme of the *Triumph of Thomas* panel. Polzer, “Triumph of Thomas Panel,” 35.

shown defeated at Aquinas' feet, his work symbolized by a book that lies face down and offers no rays of light to the Christian theologian.

Like the *Triumph of St. Augustine* fresco in Ferrara, the *Triumph of St. Thomas* panel in Pisa admitted pagan philosophers into a Christian representation and into a Christian space, and like the Ferrara fresco, the Pisa panel distinguished between the authority of pagan philosophy and that of Christian theology through the spatial and compositional division of figures within the work of art. Here, pagan and Judeo-Christian are separated by relative depth and by a vertical hierarchy that corresponds to the relative sanctity of the figures depicted. Aristotle and Plato stand closer to the surface of the represented space than the theologians above—though the space of the representation is ambiguous, these figures turn into the depth of the painting and angle their books in such a manner that they may be understood as standing to either side of Aquinas in a line that is parallel with the picture plane, while the books of the Christians and the tablets of Moses, above, are subtly turned as if to imply an arc of increasing depth into the sacred space of the altarpiece. Furthermore, the presence of Jesus at the pinnacle of the altarpiece establishes a literal mark for determining the proximity of a figure to God—the theologians are not only highest in the represented space, but closest, literally, to God. Aquinas is both literally and figuratively beneath them, but still closer to the Divine than the philosophers, who are separated from the sanctity of Christ and the theologians by a compositional divide.

The greatest distinction between the Judeo-Christian theologians and the classical philosophers is made, however, not through the compositional division of figures, but in the descending rays of gold which signify the divine inspiration of the true theologians.

Nine golden rays proceed out of the mouth of Jesus. (Figure 52) Six of the rays lead to the heads of each of the six Judeo-Christian theologians, signifying the divine inspiration of the authors of the Bible—Moses, the author of the Old Testament Pentateuch, the four Evangelist Gospel writers, and Paul as the author of the Epistles. (Figures 53) Three rays fall directly on St. Thomas Aquinas, showing that he, as a true, Christian theologian, is also the recipient of divine inspiration. No golden rays connect the pagan philosophers to God, and this absence signifies a contemporary and represented belief that the philosophers, though they could offer in their works certain elements or beliefs that were useful to the Christian theologian, were not, themselves, inspired by the Divine Source, and thus could not be recognized as truthful or proper authorities on sacred matters in the same manner as the divinely inspired theologians. (Figure 54)

A direct comparison between these examples of Trecento iconography and later Quattrocento works of art may serve to illustrate the change in Renaissance beliefs regarding the relative status of classical poets and philosophers that is seen also in the writing of the Italian humanists of that later century. Care must be taken, however, not to over simplify the comparison or to gloss over the particular significance of the earlier examples, and the Pisa *St. Thomas* panel, in particular. The mere presence of classical philosophers does not distinguish this as a humanist or proto-humanist work of art. The iconography is, by the combined nature of its primary subject and its original setting, decidedly Dominican and explicitly Thomistic. This panel more closely represents the contemporary views expressed by the Dominican Fra Giovanino, who opposed the poet Mussato and his views that the classical poets were divinely inspired by God and wrote allegorically on matters of Christian doctrine, while at the same time allowing that there



was a certain use for the philosophical writings of the Ancient philosophers.<sup>24</sup> This panel is not so much an artistic precedent for the High Renaissance depiction of classical philosophers and poets as it is a foil for those works of the later period which, like Signorelli's series of poets in the Cappella Nova, present classical authors not as different and distinct from the theologians, but as theologians, themselves.

Classical authors appeared in relatively few Renaissance works of art or cycles of decoration, and even in those instances, the particular meaning or purpose of their representation was slow to change. Classical poets and philosophers were given a place in the cycles of famous men—the *uomini famosi*—that decorate both public and private spaces in the Quattrocento, but in this context their appearance depended as much or more on their status as men of particular virtue or accomplishment rather than on any notion that they were, or could have been theologians in the Christian tradition. Thus, for example, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, and Homer were included in the series of panels that decorated Federico da Montefeltro's *studiolo* in Urbino, together with Ptolemy, Cicero, Seneca, Boethius, Dante, Petrarch, the Church Fathers Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory, Moses, Pope Sixtus IV, Bartolo of Sassoferrato, John Duns Scotus, and other men drawn from the ranks of acclaimed academics, philosophers, theologians, scholars of law, poets, and the like.<sup>25</sup> Though the inscriptions accompanying the portraits of Plato and Homer made reference, in each case and respectively, to some aspect of “divine

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<sup>24</sup> Curtius discussed the particulars of Fra Giovanino's arguments, in which the Dominican argued for a relative authority of pagan and Christian authors. Curtius, *European Literature*, 216-17.

philosophy” or the “divine variety” of the teachings of his poetry, this vague association between the philosopher’s or poet’s work and the Divine was not made explicitly Christian.<sup>26</sup> The dedicatory inscriptions accompanying the portraits of Jerome and Ambrose did refer to Christianity, explicitly. Jerome was praised “because he expressed the precepts of the Christian faith with learning and elegance”—*ob fidei christianae praecepta, doctrina elegantia[ue] illustrata*—and Ambrose “for adopting the name of Christianity, and adorning it with the beauty of Latin speech”—*susceptum christianum nomen et ornatum latini sermonis jucunditate*.<sup>27</sup> Had the classical authors been praised in such terms, they, too, would have been placed with the Christian theologians, but their inclusion in the cycle was dependent, instead, on their accomplishments as secular, pagan men, and this was reflected in the dedicatory inscriptions which named them as philosopher and poet.

The same, or something similar, was true of the cycles of *uomini famosi* painted on the walls of the Collegio del Cambio in Perugia and in the Borgia Apartments of the Vatican. In both of these instances, notable pagans were included as exemplars of the

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<sup>25</sup> On the Urbino *studiolo*, see in particular Luciano Cheles, *The Studiolo of Urbino: An Iconographic Investigation*, (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> The inscriptions are transcribed and translated in Cheles, *Studiolo of Urbino*, 93. Beneath Plato: *Platoni Atheniensi, humanae divinae[ue] philosophiae antistiti celeberrimo, Fed[ericus] dicavit ex observantia*—“To Plato of Athens, most famous high priest of human and divine philosophy, Federico dedicated this out of reverence.” And beneath Homer: *Homero Smirnaeo, cujus poësin ob divinam disciplinarum varietatem omnis aetas admirata est, assecutus nemo post, gratitudo pos[uit]*—“To Homer of Smyrna, whose poetry, on account of the divine variety of its teachings, has been admired by every age, and equaled by no one afterwards, gratitude placed this.”

<sup>27</sup> Cheles, *Studiolo of Urbino*, 94.

virtues depicted in personification above or enthroned, respectively. Thus, Socrates was included among the famous men painted in the Collegio del Cambio, together with Numa Pompilius and Fabius Maximus under the personification of Prudence, as classical figures who were thought to particularly exemplify that virtue. (Figure 55) These figures stand well apart from the lunette in the same room of the Collegio in which God the Father appears in majesty over the notable men of the Jewish tradition and the Sibyls, who, in the Christian view, prophesied the coming of Jesus. (Figure 56) The presence of one member of the Godhead over the wise men and kings of the Jews and the seers of classical Greece and Rome shows that these figures were believed to have participated in the greater history of Christian religion, though they remain separated from Christianity, as such—both Jews and Sibyls move toward the birth of Jesus, depicted in the lunette immediately to the left, on the adjoining wall, but Jesus is significantly absent from the particular lunette in which they stand, and they are in that manner denoted as having lived in an era that did not know Christ. Classical poets and philosophers, of whom Socrates is the only one represented in this cycle of famous historical figures and Christian events, are markedly absent from the ranks of those who are present within the Church, even as it is very broadly, if traditionally, conceived and represented in Pietro Perugino's frescoes.<sup>28</sup>

Similar ideas were represented in the slightly later frescoes that decorated the private rooms of Pope Alexander VI in the Vatican—the so-called Borgia Apartments—

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<sup>28</sup> Note that Augustine included the Sibyls among those belonging to the City of God in his *City of God*. Perugino's inclusion of the Sibyls belongs to this long established tradition.

painted by Bernardino di Betto, called Pinturicchio, and his assistants. There, Old Testament figures were painted together with Sibyls in the Sala delle Sibille. Though classical authors, poets, and sages did appear in the greater program of decoration, they were again presented as exemplars of virtue or accomplishment rather than as participants in the theological history of the Christian Church. Aristotle, Euclid, and other pagan worthies were painted in the Sala delle Arti Liberali—the Room of the Liberal Arts—but not in the Sala del Credo, the Sala delle Sibille, the Sala dei Santi, or the Sala dei Misteri—the Room of the Creed, the Room of the Sibyls, the Room of the Saints, or the Room of the Mysteries. In the Sala delle Arti Liberali, Aristotle was included among the figures who stand before the enthroned personification of Dialectic—he can be recognized by his wide-brimmed hat (Figure 57)—and Euclid with those who practice Geometry (Figure 58). Because poetry was classified under the art of Music, Virgil and Homer found a place beside Music’s throne, behind Tubalcain and his hammers (Figure 59). Though, in each of these instances, classical figures were presented within larger programs that included Judeo-Christian figures, even representations of God or the various members of the Christian Godhead, nothing in the iconography, the composition, or the context of the decoration suggested or conveyed the idea that these figures were anything more than men of particular virtue or accomplishment, nothing suggested that they were anything more than pagan, that they had any particular place in the development of Christian history, or that they acted as theologians in the Christian sense. This is not the case with certain other works, like Signorelli’s poet portraits in the Cappella Nova or Botticelli’s *Primavera*, which convey or depend on the idea that classical authors were theologians, and thus represent a parallel tradition, existing and

developing simultaneously with the decoration of Federico da Montefeltro's *studiolo*, Perugia's Collegio del Cambio, and the Sala delle Arti Liberali in the Vatican's Borgia Apartments, but distinct from the concept and tradition of the *uomini famosi* which these works represent.

The representation of Hermes Trismegistus in marble mosaic on the floor of the Duomo in Siena stands in marked contrast to the representation of classical poets and philosophers as *uomini famosi* in a purely secular fashion.<sup>29</sup> (Figure 60) This "Thrice-Blessed" Hermes was venerated throughout European history and celebrated particularly by Renaissance humanists as one of the earliest of the *prisci theologii*—he was described variously by Ficino, for example, as the original head of all ancient teaching or as the first of the learned and divinely inspired Egyptians.<sup>30</sup> In the mosaic on the floor of the Siena Duomo, Hermes is presented as a classical contemporary of Moses—an inscription at the base of the panel names him and describes him as such: HERMES MERCURIUS TRIMEGISTUS / CONTEMPORANEUS MOYSI—and as the giver of literacy and law to the Ancient Egyptians. Hermes stands at the center of the composition, one hand resting on an inscribed plaque, the other holding a book, which he gives to one of the two figures to the left of the scene. The book is open, and on its pages are inscribed the words SUSCI

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<sup>29</sup> On the Hermes Trismegistus panel and its context within the program of the Duomo's decoration, see Roberto Guerrini, "Ermete e le sibille. Il primo riquadro della navata centrale e le tarsie delle navate laterali," in Marilena Caciorgna and Roberto Guerrini, *Il Pavimento del Duomo di Siena: L'Arte della Tarsia Marmorea dal XIV al XIX Secolo Fonti e Simbologia* (Florence: Silvana Editoriale, 2004), 13-51.

<sup>30</sup> Clement Salaman, Introduction to *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol. 7 (London, 2003), xxi; Pasquale Arfé, "The Annotations of Nicolaus Cusanus and Giovanni Andrea Bussi on the Asclepius," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 62 (1999), 35.

/ PITE / O LI / CTE / RAS / ET LE / GES / EGIP / TII—*suscipite o licteras et leges egyptii* or “receive, O Egyptians, letters and laws.”<sup>31</sup> It is the inscription on the plaque beside Hermes, however, which reveals the reason for his inclusion in the decorative program of the Duomo and places him in relation to orthodox Christian belief and to the theologians who reveal the “true” mysteries of the Christian faith. The inscription presents a passage from Hermes Trismegistus’ writing, which, transcribed and translated, reads:

DEUS OMINUM CREATOR / SECUM DEUM FECIT / VISIBILEM ET  
HUNC / FECIT PRIMUM ET SOLUM / QUO OBLECTATUS EST ET /  
VALDE AMAVIT PROPRIUM / FILIUM QUI APPELLATUR /  
SANCTUM VERBUM

God, creator of all things, made a second, visible God and made him first and only, in whom he is pleased, and loved him as his own son, and called him the Holy Word.

This particular passage was hailed in the Renaissance as evidence of Hermes Trismegistus’ knowledge the Trinity of God and of the Christian mystery of the Divine Word, though early Quattrocento commentators yet maintained that he had not understood these things clearly and that he had only hinted at them in his texts.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the passage inscribed on the floor of the Duomo in Siena is ambiguously Trinitarian, at best, verges on Arianism, and is not explicitly Christian. Inasmuch as Hermes, in this passage, appears to have believed that the Second Person of the Godhead was created by the First, he was at odds with official Church doctrine, which maintained that Jesus was

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<sup>31</sup> Guerrini, “Ermete e le sibille,” 13.

<sup>32</sup> Arfé, “Annotations of Nicolaus Cusanus,” 36.

not created by God the Father, but co-existent with him from eternity.<sup>33</sup> Yet because this Hermes was believed to have had even a vague understanding of the triune nature of God—the inscription drawn from his writings attests to this—he was perceived by those Christians who knew his work to be something different from those classical poets and philosophers who professed a belief in a pantheon of deities. As such, Hermes could be seen by the Renaissance Christians as a “true” theologian, though handicapped by the accident of his place in history and in the development of the Christian religion. His placement in the Church, as a concept, and in the Duomo, in mosaic representation, is dependent on the perception that he was a theologian and represents that same perception. Within the iconographic program that decorates the floor of the Duomo in Siena, Hermes Trismegistus is positioned within the sacred space of the Cathedral, though his position near the entrance, at a considerable distance from the altar, may distinguish him from others more fully enlightened or initiated.<sup>34</sup> He is present not simply as a wise or virtuous man—a member of the *uomini famosi*—but as a theologian from the classical era who was in some manner aware of the “true” nature of God. Furthermore, in presenting Hermes as the source of all law and literacy among the Ancient Egyptians, the artist and iconographers of the Siena panel effectively appropriated and made Christian any aspect

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the “Declaration of Faith” attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s biography, as in *St. Gregory Thaumaturgus: Life and Works*, trans. Michael Slusser, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 98 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 54. Gregory Thaumaturgus stated that there is nothing created in the Trinity. The view of Hermes, as expressed on the plaque in the mosaic on the floor of the Duomo in Siena is closer to that of the Arian heretics, who maintained that the Second Person of the Trinity was created by God the Father.

<sup>34</sup> Guerrini, “Ermete e le sibille,” 15.

of truth or knowledge that subsequently appeared in Egyptian culture or among those who could be shown to have come into contact with Egyptian law or literary work, including those philosophers of Ancient Greece who traveled to Egypt, Plato among them. In the Siena Duomo, Hermes Trismegistus was presented as a theologian, as an initiate into the mysteries of the Christian faith, though he was permitted to know them only obscurely, and as a means by which these “truths” were passed, if obscurely, even into the law and culture of “pagan” antiquity.

A Renaissance belief in the transmission of knowledge and theology from the Hebrew tradition to the cultures of classical Egypt and Greece may be represented in a choice few figures painted into the decorative programs of the Vatican’s Borgia Apartments and the Sistine Chapel walls. Moses appears with Isis / Io as a source of laws and letters in a medallion painted on the transverse arch of the Sala dei Santi in the Borgia Apartments.<sup>35</sup> (Figure 61) In Luca Signorelli’s *Testament and Death of Moses*, painted on the south wall of the Cappella Sistina, a conspicuously nude figure sitting in the crowd of attentive Hebrews at Moses’ feet (figure 62) could represent a classical “stranger” in their midst and the means by which Mosaic law and learning was received into the Egyptian or Greek cultures.<sup>36</sup> If these works are somewhat syncretic in theme or

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<sup>35</sup> Fritz Saxl identified the scene as Io-Isis enthroned and teaching the Egyptians with Moses at her side. Fritz Saxl, *Lectures*, (London: The Warburg Institute, 1957), 1:182. Claudia Cieri Via identified the figure to the left as Hermes Trismegistus, though, apart from a very general resemblance to the figure of Hermes depicted elsewhere in the program, there is, in fact, no real reason to believe that this is so. Claudia Cieri Via, “Characteres et figuras in opere magico: Pinturicchio et la decoration de la camera segreta de l’appartement Borgia,” *Revue de l’Art* 94 (1991), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Franz Wickhoff noted the classical nudity of the figure and identified him as “the stranger among the Israelites.” Franz Wickhoff, “Der Apollo von Belvedere als



in the particulars of their representation, they depend more on the long-standing belief in the Jewish origins of classical wisdom than on any sense that the recipients of this wisdom were, themselves, theologians. Nothing in either work depicts the recipient of Mosaic wisdom as anything other than pagan, and each work reinforces the idea that any truth in pagan knowledge was twice removed from its original source in God.

The idea and representation of classical figures as true theologians did not appear again in Renaissance art as explicitly as it had in the Siena mosaic panel of Hermes Trismegistus until the opening years of the Cinquecento and Signorelli's series of classical poets painted in the Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral. To be sure, the simple fact that both the mosaic floor of the Siena Duomo and the socle frescoes of the Cappella Nova present a classical figure or figures as a theologian or as theologians does not by necessity bring the two works together in any sort of continuous development or tradition. Just as Renaissance poets and philosophers expressed varying and independent ideas on the developing concept of the *theologicae poetae*, so also Renaissance artists and their iconographers represented the concept in various ways according to the particular desire to communicate an idea or message appropriate to the greater meaning of the iconographic program as a whole. The purpose of the Siena panel would seem to have been relatively straightforward and broadly syncretic. Hermes Trismegistus was included

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Fremdling bei den Israeliten," *Schriften* 2, ed. M. Dvorak (Vienna, 1913), 406ff. Leopold Ettliger supported Wickhoff's identification with a Biblical reference from Deuteronomy 29:10 ff. and suggested, further, that the figure "becomes a central figure in this assembly, for through him the Gentiles would again be brought within the writ of the Covenant and of the Church." Leopold Ettliger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo: Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), 72. Ettliger did not, however, further discuss the idea of a transfer of wisdom from the Jewish to the Greek tradition.

in the mosaic floor, in an iconographic program that includes the Sibyls and various Old Testament figures and scenes, as a means of showing the presence and action of God among the people of the classical and Jewish cultures. The purpose and function of the classical poets in Signorelli's fresco cycle was quite different. These figures were present, as was Dante, to lend theological authority—literally the sense of legitimacy that derives from a properly recognized and respected author—to the mythological scenes depicted in the socle frescoes. The Orvieto poets are present not because they, themselves, are able to convey the idea that the suffering of those in Purgatory can be mitigated by the prayers of the living, but because the ability of the mythological scenes to convey that idea depends on the recognition of the theological authority of the authors of classical mythology. For this very reason, the classical poets painted in the Cappella Nova are depicted as true theologians, wholly and directly inspired by God, rather than as poets or sophists once removed from the Divine and understanding God only obscurely, like the Hermes in Siena. There is no intermediary figure or carefully worded caveat painted into the program of the Cappella Nova, nothing even to imply that the classical poets do not see God directly. Just the opposite is true. Two of the poets lean forward and look out of the framing portals in which they sit. One lifts his eyes to the Apocalyptic events depicted in the fresco above him. (Figure 42) The other looks to the vault above the altar, toward God.<sup>37</sup> (Figure 31) Here, in this figure, in the representation of even one classical poet-

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<sup>37</sup> Note that scholars have seen this pose, specifically his gaze toward “the scene of heaven,” as evidence that this figure is Christian *rather than* pagan, not recognizing that the contemporary belief in classical poets as theologians in the Christian tradition allows him to be both Christian *and* classical. See Creighton Gilbert, *How Fra Angelico and Signorelli Saw the End of the World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 97.

theologian who lifts his eyes to the source of Christian knowledge and, though composing poems that speak in their literal sense of pagan deities, writes in allegory of the mysteries of the Christian faith, the Renaissance artist makes manifest what had been slowly developing in poetic theory over the two centuries preceding, an idea that was implicit in Pico's late-Quattrocento philosophy but found visual expression only in the first decades of the Italian Cinquecento—an unqualified, unreserved belief in classical poets as theologians who were directly inspired by the Christian God.

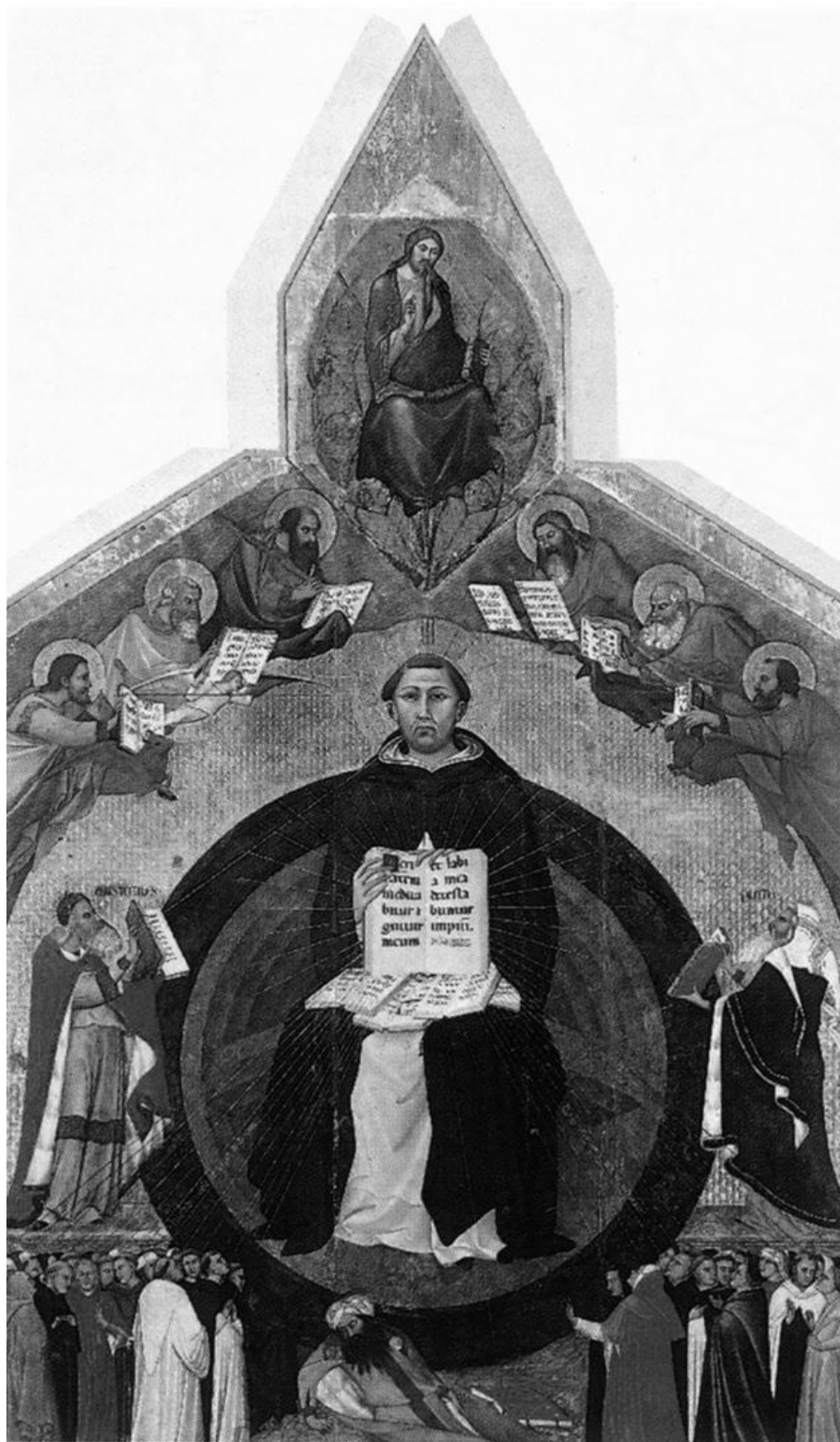


Figure 51 – Francesco Traini, *Triumph of St. Thomas*, Santa Caterina, Pisa

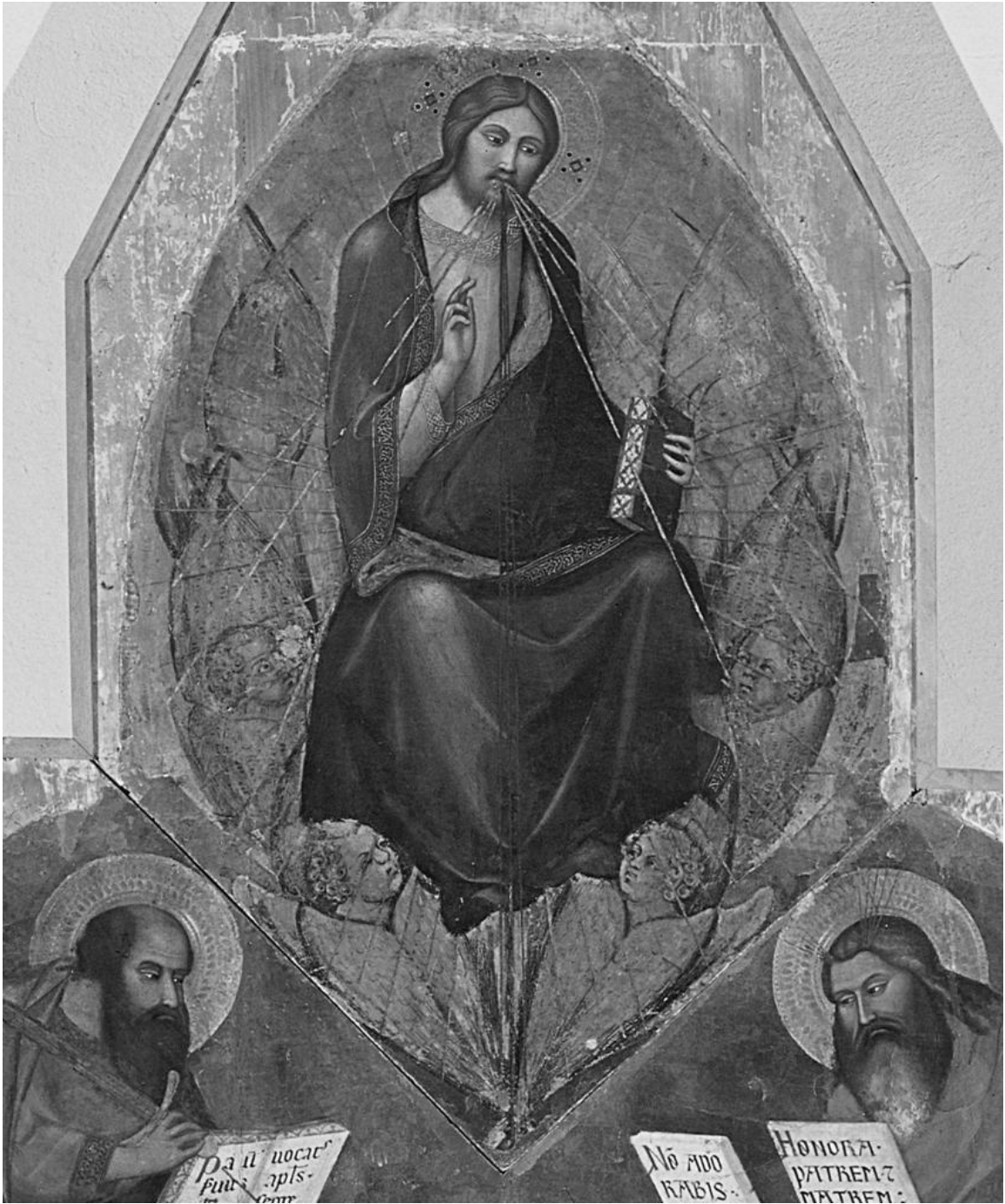


Figure 52 – Francesco Traini, *Triumph of St. Thomas*, detail showing Christ with nine rays of inspiration descending from his mouth Santa Caterina, Pisa

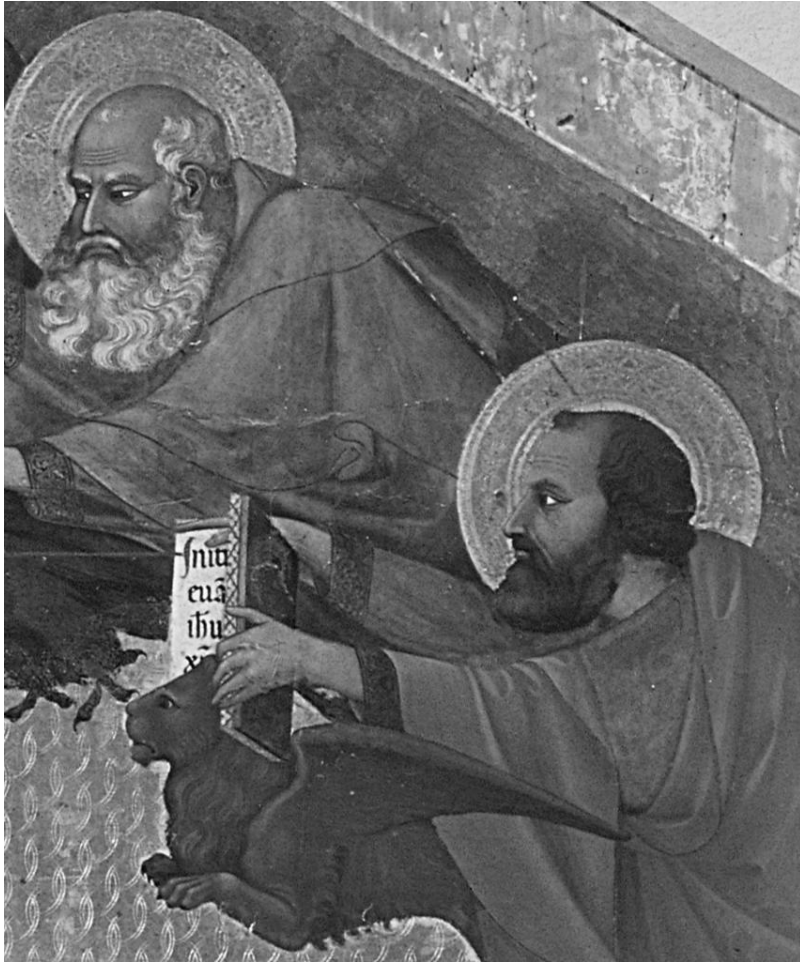


Figure 53 – Francesco Traini, *Triumph of St. Thomas*, detail showing St. Mark and the ray of inspiration from Christ, which is visible crossing the halo of the Saint, Santa Caterina, Pisa

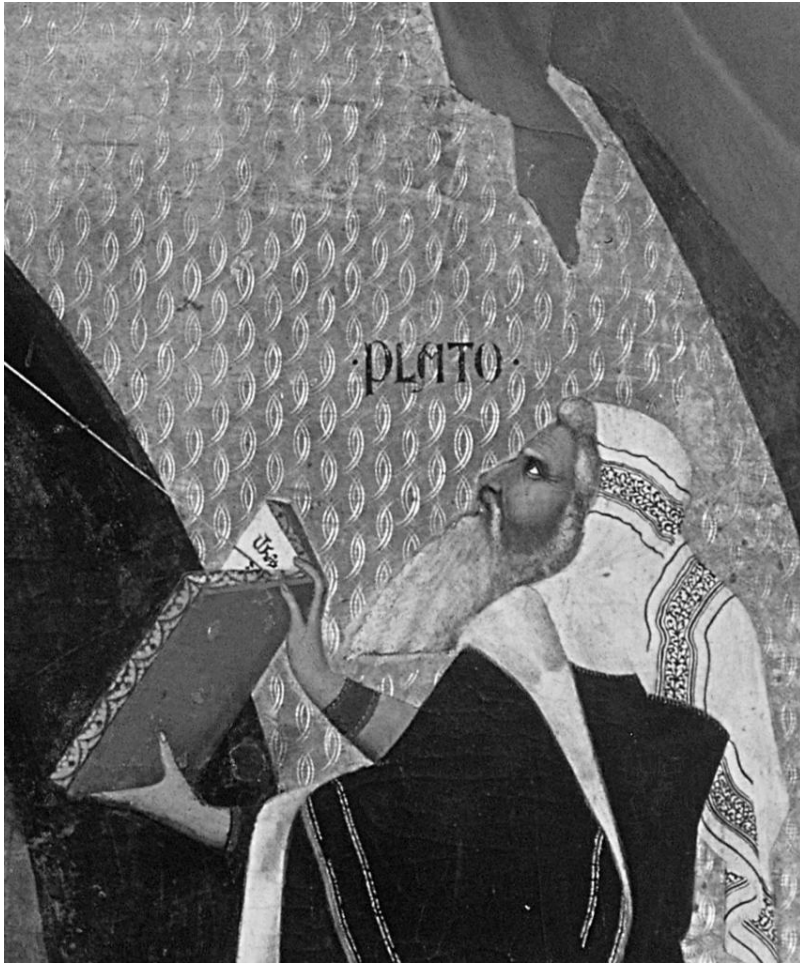


Figure 54 – Francesco Traini, *Triumph of St. Thomas*, detail showing Plato and the absence of a ray of inspiration from Christ, Santa Caterina, Pisa

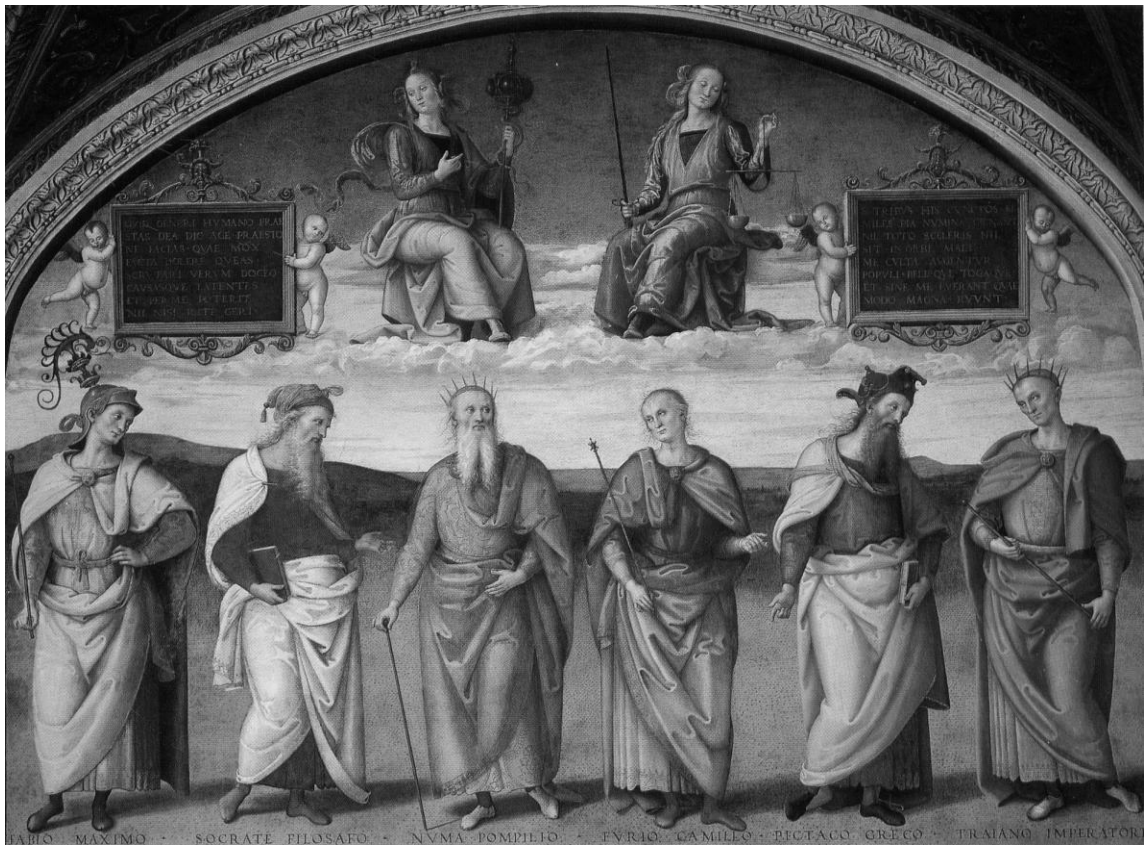


Figure 55 – Pietro Perugino, Lunette with Prudence, Justice, and Six *Uomini Famosi*, from the Collegio del Cambio, Perugia





Figure 56 –View of the Collegio del Cambio, with fresco decoration by Pietro Perugino, Perugia. The lunette depicting God the Father over Jewish *Uomini* and the Sibyls is to the right and the *Nativity* is at right center



Figure 57 – Pinturicchio, *Dialectic*, from the Sala delle Arti Liberali, the Borgia Apartments, the Vatican



Figure 58 – Pinturicchio, *Geometry*, from the Sala delle Arti Liberali, the Borgia Apartments, the Vatican



Figure 59 – Pinturicchio, *Music*, from the Sala delle Arti Liberali, the Borgia Apartments, the Vatican



Figure 60 – Mosaic panel depicting Hermes Trismegistus, from the floor of the Duomo, Siena



Figure 61 – Pinturicchio, *Io-Isis and Moses as the Sources of Egyptian Law and Letters*, fresco decoration of the Sala dei Santi, the Borgia Apartments, the Vatican



Figure 62 – Luca Signorelli, *The Testament and Death of Moses*, detail with the nude figure in the lower left corner, south wall of the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican, c. 1481

## CHAPTER 5

CLASSICAL THEOLOGIANS IN RAPHAEL'S FRESCOES  
OF THE STANZA DELLA SEGNATURA

The preceding chapter examines developments in Renaissance poetic theory, philosophy, and artistic representation that are significant in their own right, but also serves as the necessary preface to an examination of the representation and meaning of figures both classical and Christian in Raphael Sanzio's fresco cycle in the Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura. The precise relationship between "pagan" and Christian figures in the Stanza della Segnatura fresco cycle has long been an issue and has featured prominently in scholarship from Giorgio Vasari's description of the room in the mid-sixteenth century to Timothy Verdon's study of the *School of Athens* and *Disputa* frescoes in the late twentieth.<sup>1</sup> Though Verdon properly looked to the Renaissance idea of *prisci theologii* to explain the role played by the philosophers in the *School of Athens* fresco, his reading of the represented space of the *School of Athens* and *Disputa* frescos and the respective placement of the figures in each may have prevented him from realizing the full extent to which the philosophers are, in this cycle, depicted as initiates into the mysteries of the Christian faith. As a result, Verdon's reading of the frescoes and their meaning is more in line with mid-Quattrocento philosophy and representation. A very careful study of the figures represented on all four walls of the Stanza della

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Vita de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori italiani*. Timothy Verdon, "Pagans in the Church: The *School of Athens* in Religious Context," in Marcia Hall, ed., *Raphael's "School of Athens"* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 114-30.



Segnatura will show that the roles played by Ancient poets and philosophers in the fresco cycle are entirely *a la mode du jour*, as it were—in the style of the day, or represented according to Cinquecento belief, exemplifying, perhaps even illustrating Pico’s philosophy rather than Caldiera’s and following from artistic precedent set at the beginning of the sixteenth century rather than any Tre- or Quattrocento traditions.<sup>2</sup>

### Vasari and Verdon on the “Pagans” in the Stanza della Segnatura

Vasari described Raphael’s “*School of Athens*” (figure 63) as a depiction of theologians reconciling philosophy and astrology with theology.<sup>3</sup> Vasari correctly identified Plato and Aristotle, who stand in the center of the composition, but mistook Pythagoras for Saint Matthew and imagined that the painted scene contained both pagans and Evangelists. Thus, when he wrote, “There are some astrologers to one side who have drawn geomantic and astrological figures and characters in various forms on some tablets, and they send them by means of certain beautiful angels to the Evangelists, who

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<sup>2</sup> Note that various authors have proposed as precedents one or more of the Tre- and Quattrocento works described previously in this dissertation. See, for example, Julius von Scholsser’s essay on the precedents of the Stanza della Segnatura, focusing on Giusto’s fresco in Padua and Andrea Bonaiuto’s frescoes in the Chapterhouse of Santa Maria Novella, Florence: Julius von Schlosser, “Giusto’s Fresken in Padua und die Vorläufer der Stanza della Segnatura,” *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 7 (1896), 13-100; Polzer makes repeated references to the Stanza della Segnatura in his essay on the *Triumph of Thomas* panel: Joseph Polzer, “The Triumph of Thomas Panel in Santa Caterina, Pisa: Meaning and Date,” *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 37:1 (1993), 41, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 313.

explain them,”<sup>4</sup> he referred, respectively, to the figure groups to either side of the foreground. This is evident from his description of group around Pythagoras, his supposed Matthew, the Evangelist, in the left foreground (Figure 64):

And behind Saint Matthew, who is copying characters out of the engraved tablets held by an angel and writing them down in a book, an old man who has placed a sheet of paper on his knee copies all the words Saint Matthew is writing down.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Vasari imagined a motion across the composition, parallel to the picture plane, as the characters on the far right of the scene, Vasari’s astrologers, inscribe figures and forms on tablets and send them by means of angels, similar in appearance to the boy kneeling before Matthew, to the characters to the far left of the scene, that is to the Evangelist and his associates, where the tablets are explained and the explanations written. Thus, for Vasari, this one wall of the Stanza della Segnatura was, in itself, an expression of the reconciliation of pagan and Christian traditions.

Vasari erred. Where he saw an Evangelist, we now recognize Pythagoras.<sup>6</sup> Where he saw a communion of pagans and Christians, of philosophers and theologians, we now recognize only pagans, only philosophers. If we do admit a few stray Christians—either masquerading as classical philosophers, like Donato Bramante in the role of Euclid or Michelangelo as Heraclitus, or, like Raphael himself, simply standing in the crowd—these

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<sup>4</sup> Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 313.

<sup>5</sup> Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 313.

<sup>6</sup> J.-D. Passavant identified the figure as Pythagoras in his 1860 publication. J.-D. Passavant, *Raphael d’Urbino et son Père Giovanni Santi* (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1860), 121ff.

are either so transformed or so positioned that they carry no real Christian significance. These are not Vasari's theologians, but actors, homage, the artist's portrait, i.e. artistic conceits rather than iconographic signs.

There may be a certain validity to Vasari's description, however. If the *School of Athens* is not, itself, a depiction of the concord between pagan philosophy and Christian theology, that theme is in some way implicit in the juxtaposition of classical and Christian elements that comprise the greater program of decoration in the Stanza della Segnatura. In more recent scholarship, Timothy Verdon pursued this concord between pagan and Christian in his study of the *School of Athens* and its relation to the *Disputa*.<sup>7</sup> Verdon's study—a chapter in Marcia Hall's *Raphael's "School of Athens,"* titled "Pagans in the Church: The *School of Athens* in Religious Context"—sought the underlying context of Renaissance beliefs which provided both justification and reason for the presence of pagan figures in the Christian space that is the Stanza della Segnatura. Verdon, responding to Vasari's description, analyzed the space of the room and the space depicted in the frescoes and argued for an implied motion across the chamber, from the "*School of Athens*" to the "*Disputa*," such that the pagan figures of the former fresco could be read as approaching God in the latter. Furthermore, Verdon interpreted the architecture of the two scenes as a single depiction of a unified space, such that the pagan philosophers, on one side, stand in what would be the nave of a great church, with the

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<sup>7</sup> Verdon, "Pagans in the Church," 114-30. On the relationship of pagan and Christian elements, see also Franz Wickhoff, "Die Bibliothek Julius' II," *Jahrbuch der königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 5 (1893), 49-64, in particular his view of the primacy of theology and the propriety of such a representation in the Stanza della Segnatura on pp. 63-64.

Christian theologians, Saints, and God arranged around the sacrament in the apse of that same structure.<sup>8</sup>

The respective placement of philosophers and theologians is of the greatest significance to Verdon's interpretation of meaning in the fresco cycle. In his reading of the room, its space, decoration, and meaning, pagans had a place in the church, both literally and figuratively. Quoting from the writings of Augustine, Boccaccio, Salutati, Caldiera, and Ficino, Verdon reconstructed a system of belief which included Greek philosophy in the "divine plan" of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Verdon found in these authors and in the decoration of the Stanza della Segnatura a "syncretic vision of intellectual history," in which pagan philosophers, divinely inspired in their quest for wisdom, approached, imitated, or even understood the Christian God, though obscurely.<sup>10</sup> In the texts from which he quotes, and in his reading of the Stanza's decoration, pagans were permitted "into the Church" and allowed to approach God because they participated in God's "hidden plan," though they did not realize that they did so. Thus, in the Stanza della Segnatura representation, pagans remained separated from the Christians, who, by virtue of their belief in the Incarnation and the Passion, may lift their eyes to see God.<sup>11</sup> Plato and Aristotle, together with others of their ilk, stood in the nave of a church depicted on the walls and encompassing the space of the Stanza della Segnatura, proper. Though they were, and, in Verdon's reading, remain pagan, their participation in God's universal plan

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<sup>8</sup> Verdon, "Pagans in the Church," 119-21.

<sup>9</sup> Verdon, "Pagans in the Church," 122-27.

<sup>10</sup> Verdon, "Pagans in the Church," 122-25.

<sup>11</sup> Verdon, "Pagans in the Church," 126, 128.

gained them admission into that sacred space. Because they were, and remain pagan, they were permitted to enter and approach God, but remained in the depicted and conceptual nave, separated from the true believers, the theologians in the *Disputa*, who worship and debate in the sanctuary. Furthermore, in Verdon's reading of the message of the fresco cycle and the unified space of room and its decoration, the pagan philosophers remained behind even the visitor to the chamber, who, as a presumed Christian, stood closer to God.<sup>12</sup>

Verdon's method was correct, even if the particulars of his argument will benefit from refinement. Admirable in his study is his willingness to posit a connection between the *School of Athens* and the *Disputa*, despite their spatial and (apparent) thematic opposition, and to pursue a meaning for the former fresco that is appropriate to the religious character of both setting and patron. Verdon's study ultimately falls short, however. His argument that the *School of Athens* and *Disputa* share in a common space, both conceptual and represented, together also with the actual space of the room, itself, is countered by the repeated representation of certain figures on multiple walls. Dante's presence in both the *Parnassus* and *Disputa*, for example, suggests that these frescoes were conceived as separate scenes, rather than unified in space and concept. Either two Dantes appear in one, unified space—Verdon's great church / Church—or one Dante appears twice in the distinct spaces that are the respective realms of Poetry and Theology. The remainder of his argument—that the Greek philosophers are present within the church

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<sup>12</sup> Verdon, "Pagans in the Church," 128.

/ Church and approach God, though they do not know Him and can not understand Him—will not hold if his interpretation of the space of the frescoes is compromised.

In Verdon's reading, the pagan philosophers of the *School of Athens* shared a space with the Christian theologians of the *Disputa*—a space which encompassed the represented depth of both frescoes and the room in between—yet these two disparate populations remained separate, both physically and conceptually. Verdon found support for this idea not only in the represented space of the painted scenes, but also in the philosophy of Giovanni Caldierra, whose *Concord of the Poets, Philosophers, and Theologians*, penned in the middle of the fifteenth-century, allowed some degree of true perception—or perception of the truth—to the Ancient poets and philosophers, but maintained that these understood obscurely, as if seen from a distance or through a veil, what their Christian counterparts, the theologians, knew by certain knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Verdon's interpretation of the role played by the classical figures in the decoration of the Stanza della Segnatura is very much in keeping with mid-Quattrocento philosophy and with the representation of classical figures in works of art from that century, even from the century preceding. In actuality, classical figures appear throughout the Stanza della Segnatura fresco cycle, in the *School of Athens* and the so-called *Parnassus* frescoes, but also in the *Disputa*, and their placement and actions in the respective fresco scenes, understood in the light of later Quattrocento philosophy and the early Cinquecento artistic precedent of Signorelli's cycle of poet-theologians, shows them to be more than pagan sages on the path toward Christian knowledge. In the frescoes of the Stanza della

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<sup>13</sup> Verdon, "Pagans in the Church," 125-26.

Segnatura, classical poets are portrayed as the direct recipients of divine inspiration, and classical philosophers, the heirs to that most ancient theology, are invested with such theological authority that they not only stand among the Christians in the *Disputa*, but one stands even nearer to God than the honored Church Fathers and, with his finger raised toward Heaven, reveals to Ambrose the glory of the Trinity made manifest above. With due respect to Verdon, these are not “pagans in the Church,” as envisioned or represented by Caldiera and his contemporaries, but *poetae et philosophi theologici* as imagined by Pico and represented in one of the most revolutionary iconographic cycles of the early Cinquecento.

“NVMINE AFFLATVR” and the *Theologicae Poetae*  
of the “*Parnassus*” Fresco

The study of the relationship of classical and Christian figures in the Stanza della Segnatura must begin with the so-called *Parnassus* fresco, rather than with the *School of Athens* and / or *Disputa* frescoes. The theological nature of the philosophers depicted in those scenes depends on the perception of an inherited knowledge that is passed to the philosophers from their poetic predecessors, who are the more ancient theologians. In the perception of some Renaissance philosophers, certain classical philosophers could be considered true theologians because they had inherited a true theology from the poet-theologians, who were, themselves, the recipients of inspiration or revelation directly from the divine source. This—the divine inspiration of the classical and Christian poets and their participation in the Christian tradition as true theologians—is precisely what is

shown in the *Parnassus* fresco, as a careful study of the scene and of the superimposed inscription—*NVMINE AFFLATVR*—will show.

The north wall of the Stanza della Segnatura is decorated with a scene of classical and Christian poets gathered around and amidst the Muses on the summit of a grassy hill—the fresco known popularly as the “*Parnassus*” and read as a depiction of Apollo with the Muses and his devotees or “children,” the poets. (Figure 65) Indeed, the greater number of figures in the scene are poets—seventeen of the twenty-eight figures wear the laurel wreath crown given in Antiquity and in the Renaissance to the poet-laureate, and another is identified by her name written on the scroll she holds aloft: Sappho—the female poet from the island of Lesbos. If these figures are largely indistinct in their particular representation—most do not display any recognizable attribute—three of them, in addition to Sappho, may be identified with near certainty. These are the figures standing in a loose group to the upper left of the scene. (Figure 66) One, standing in front of the others, lifts sightless eyes as if toward heaven, even as he opens his mouth in speech and gestures to a boy sitting nearby, who, with pen poised over an unseen book or tablet, prepares to write the words of the poet. This poet may only be blind Homer of the Greeks, and his companions his Roman and Renaissance counterparts, Virgil, behind and to the right (proper), who leads Dante, easily recognized from his characteristic profile and red robe and cap.

The central figure of the *Parnassus* may also be named, though his particular representation is somewhat ambiguous. (Figure 67) Like the other poets that populate the scene, he wears the leafy crown of a laureate. He is clothed only loosely, in a swath of fabric that covers his loins and falls from one arm. In the hand of that arm he holds a



bow, with which he plays the *viola da braccio* that is held on the other arm.<sup>14</sup> This representation, together with his close association with the Muses—the nine goddesses of the musical, literary, and dramatic Arts, who are represented around this figure in the *Parnassus*—shows him to be either Apollo, the pagan god of music, poetry, and the Arts, or Apollo’s half-mortal protégé, the poet Orpheus. The latter was, in classical mythology, the son of Kalliope, that Muse which, in the *Parnassus*, reclines immediately to the right of the figure in question and turns her head toward him. In the Italian Renaissance, he was celebrated by humanist philosophers as the earliest of the *poetae theologicae*.<sup>15</sup>

Though no scholar has yet had the courage to break wholly with the well-established tradition that the central figure of the *Parnassus* is, in fact, the pagan god Apollo, a number of scholars have quietly raised objections or voiced reservations concerning the attributes and pose of the figure and the notion that he is that classical deity. Scholars have long noted and troubled over the literal anachronism of the figure’s instrument—he holds a Renaissance *viola da braccio*, rather than the classical kithara, or lyre, which was properly Apollo’s instrument—and the lack of continuity or integrity within the greater program of decoration if this figure is Apollo holding such an

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<sup>14</sup> Kathi Meyer-Baer identified the instrument as a contemporary viol. Kathi Meyer-Baer, “Musical Iconography in Raphael’s *Parnassus*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 8:2 (December 1949), 92.

<sup>15</sup> On Orpheus in the Renaissance and in humanist philosophy, see D. P. Walker, “Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16 (1953), 100-20; Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 24-29; Ilana Klutstein, *Marsilio Ficino et la Théologie Ancienne: Oracles Chaldaïques, Hymnes Orphiques, Hymnes de Proclus* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1987); Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (London: Constable & Co., 1970), 758-59.

instrument rather than his traditional lyre.<sup>16</sup> In the decoration of the vault of the Stanza della Segnatura, Apollo appears in a scene with Marsyas and two assistants, one of whom will crown the god, and the other flay the hapless satyr. (Figure 68) In that scene, Apollo holds a lyre, rather than a *viola da braccio*. So, also, in the *School of Athens* fresco, a “statue” of Apollo—a representation in *grisaille*, which is to be read as a statue placed in a niche in the background of that scene—prominently displays the classical lyre which is properly the attribute of that god.<sup>17</sup> (Figure 69) The pose of the *Parnassus* figure has also troubled scholars as an unclassical, unprecedented, un-Apollonian feature of this supposed Apollo.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, his upward gaze is anticlassical both in its lack of Antique precedent and in its apparent meaning, in that the figure is looking away from himself, upward, either toward an implied audience—a possibility that is unlikely in the extreme, given that the audience for the fresco, itself, stands before the figure in the place of the viewer and, further, that there is no reasonable cause to believe that Apollo would play for the personified Poetry in the roundel above or for any implied Christian Divinity in heaven “above”—or, more likely, toward an inspirational source. Inasmuch as this figure, like the blind Homer of the *Parnassus*, “looks” upward in a pose that signifies his turning toward the Divine source of inspiration, a pose which illustrates or enacts the very

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<sup>16</sup> Beth Cohen, “The *Rinascimento dell’Antichità* in the Art of Painting: Pausanias and Raphael’s *Parnassus*,” *Source; notes in the history of art* 3 (summer 1984), 34, 43 n. 61; Meyer-Baer, “Musical Iconography,” 94-95.

<sup>17</sup> Meyer-Baer, “Musical Iconography,” 94.

<sup>18</sup> Meyer-Baer, “Musical Iconography,” 95; H. von Einem referred to the glance as “der Antike unbekannt.” H. Von Einem, “Das Programm der Stanza della Segnatura im Vatikan,” *Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften: Geisteswissenschaften* 169 (1971), 33; See also Luba Freedman, “Apollo’s Glance in Raphael’s *Parnassus*,” *Source; notes in the history of art* 16:2 (winter 1997), 20-25.

inscription—*numine afflatur*—that is painted over the *Parnassus* fresco, he contradicts any reading or interpretation that the figure is or could be Apollo. There is nothing in Renaissance art or philosophy known to this author which would allow a pagan god, who in the classical pantheon is himself a source of poetic inspiration, to be shown as seeking or receiving inspiration from outside himself, particularly from the Christian God. The Renaissance belief that classical poets were theologians, however—the idea of *theologicae poetae*—expresses, even depends on this very concept of the divine, Christian inspiration of classical figures, the Ancient poets. Thus, what the anachronistic and incongruent instrument suggests, the pose of the figure reveals: that this is not Apollo, is not a pagan god, but is a classical poet, Orpheus, who, according to the Renaissance belief in *theologicae poetae*, looks to the Christian God and from him receives inspiration, even Christian truth. In pose and identity, the central figure of the *Parnassus* expresses the central concept of the Renaissance belief in *theologicae poetae*, expresses the concept explicit and the connotations that are implicit in the inscription written in the vault directly above the *Parnassus*, and establishes the line and lineage of true theologians who will populate the other frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura, the *School of Athens* and the *Disputa*.

The theme of poetic inspiration is expressed not only in the poets' upward gaze, but also in the inscription held by putti in the roundel immediately above the *Parnassus* fresco. This inscription functions as a sort of rubric or title for the scene depicted below and, in drawing attention to those classical theories of poetic theology which underlie the Renaissance belief in classical poets as theologians who are inspired, even possessed by God, supports the interpretation of the central figure as a poet seeking or receiving

inspiration rather a pagan deity who inspires from himself. The inscription is but two words, *numine* and *afflatur*—inscribed in Roman capitals as NVMINE and AFFLATVR—written on plaques held by the two putti who accompany the female figure of Poetry personified in a roundel on the vault of the chamber. (Figure 70) The Latin phrase *numine afflatur* is loosely translated as “divine inspiration” and more properly carries the connotation of the very breath of God or the gods as it infuses the oracle or poet, or even proceeds from the mouth of the oracle or poet who is possessed entirely by his or her divine inspiration.<sup>19</sup> Virgil used these words to describe the Delphic Sibyl as she spoke her prophesy to Aeneas, not from herself, but as inspired, or more literally enfilled by the spirit of god and speaking in a state of manic possession. Thus, in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Virgil described the Sibyl:

...Cui talia fanti,  
ante fores subito non voltus, non color unus,  
non comptae mansere comae, sed pectus anhelum,  
et rabie fera corda tument; maiorque videri  
nec mortale sonans, *adflata est numine* quando  
iam propiore dei.<sup>20</sup>

And in her, as she spoke these words, there was no single expression, no single color, nor did her hair stay in place. Her heart, now out of control, swells with madness. She is greater to look upon, and sounding inhumanly since she was *inspired by the spirit of the god*, even now drawing near.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “*afflo*”—to breathe, to breathe into; s.v. “*numen*”—the will of the gods, or the gods themselves.

<sup>20</sup> Virgil *Aeneid* 6:47-51. Virgil, *Aeneid VI*, ed. Keith Maclennan (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>21</sup> Translation by Keith Maclennan, in Virgil, *Aeneid VI*, 80.

Though the Segnatura inscription derives, ultimately, from this text, from Virgil's description of divine inspiration as manifest in the action and appearance of the Delphic Sibyl, the association of the term *numine afflatur* with the Muses and poets of the *Parnassus* fresco depends as much on Plato's theory of poetics, as expressed in the *Phaedrus* and *Ion*, as it does Virgil's *Aeneid*. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato wrote of the divine madness, literally a form of mania, that possessed the Delphic Sibyl as she prophesied, but also wrote of the madness which came from the Muses and possessed gentle and pure souls, arousing and inspiring them to song and poetry.<sup>22</sup> There, as in the *Ion*, Plato emphasized that poetic composition was achieved not through the activity of the poet, but through divine possession and the agency of the Muses. Thus, to quote from the *Phaedrus* in full:

And a third kind of possession and madness comes from the Muses: taking a tender, virgin soul and arousing it to a Bacchic frenzy of expression in lyric and other forms of poetry it educates succeeding generations by glorifying myriad deeds of those of the past; while the man who arrives at the doors of poetry without madness from the Muses, persuaded that expertise will make him a good poet, both he and his poetry, the poetry of the sane, are eclipsed by that of the mad, imperfect and unfulfilled.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in the *Ion*, Plato wrote of a madness or mania that is the divine possession of the poet by an inspiring Muse. Here, again, he specified that the poet does not create by his own technical ability, by *technêi* or "art," but from the surrender to divine power.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Plato *Phaedrus* 245.

<sup>23</sup> Plato *Phaedrus* 245, as in Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. C. J. Rowe (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, Ltd., 1986), 57-59.

<sup>24</sup> Plato *Ion* 534c.

Plato emphasized the active role of the Muse in poetic “inspiration” and the passive participation of the poet by likening these and the poet’s audience to a magnet stone, a piece of iron which touches the magnet, and any number of additional pieces of iron, respectively. According to Plato’s text, and illustrated in his metaphor, the poet, himself or herself, is merely the vehicle through which a divine message is transmitted and plays no active role in composing or crafting the poetic work. In Plato’s system of poetics and poetic mania, it is god / God, working through the poet, who composes and who “inspires” the mortal to sing of things above or beyond his or her own knowing. Plato stated this explicitly in the *Ion*:

Had [the poet] learned by rules of art, he would have known how to speak not of one theme only, but of all; and therefore god takes away the minds of poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that god himself is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us.<sup>25</sup>

Thus Plato described poetic inspiration as a form of manic possession in which the poet is roused and excited by contact with the divine and sings or speaks not from himself or herself, not through his or her own art or even his or her own volition, but from the *afflatus*—the breathing in—of god / God. Virgil’s account of the Delphic Sibyl speaking in prophesy described the same state of manic possession. His text, and the inscription drawn from that text, is relevant to the depiction of poets in the *Parnassus* only inasmuch

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<sup>25</sup> Plato *Ion* 534c, as in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), 1:289.

as the same state of mania relates, through Plato's poetic theory, to the poets as to the Sibyls.

It may be helpful to express these points somewhat more succinctly. The phrase *numine afflatur* written on the ceiling over the *Parnassus* draws from Virgil's description of the Delphic Sibyl in the *Aeneid*, in which the Sibyl prophesies not in her own words or from her own agency, but in a state of divine possession, even an inspired madness. In the Stanza della Segnatura, however, this phrase is written over a fresco populated not by the Sibyls, but by the Muses and poets. Through the use of this particular phrase, the artist and / or iconographic architects of the fresco program convey the idea that poets, also, are divinely "inspired" in the same manner of manic possession, which idea corresponds directly to Plato's poetic theory, as described in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Ion*, suggesting that these texts, also, are evoked by the Segnatura inscription. In accordance with this inscription and the associated texts, the general theme of the *Parnassus* fresco may be understood to be the divine "inspiration" of the poets, or the idea, more fully expressed, that classical and Christian poets, both, compose or produce not from themselves, but from a divine possession or inspired mania which is, according to Plato's poetic theory, the action of god, and according to a Renaissance Christian neo-Platonism and/or a humanist syncretic viewpoint, the action of the Christian God even on those theologians who lived before the advent of Christ. These concepts are made present and communicated in the Segnatura decoration and in the *Parnassus* simply by virtue of the phrase *numine afflatur* written on the vault above, regardless of the particular identity of the figures represented in the *Parnassus*—whether the central figure is Apollo, Orpheus, or any other deity or poet from the classical or Christian eras. However, given the

particular pose of the central figure—his upward gaze, as if he, like Homer, “looks” toward heaven for “inspiration,” and therefore receives rather than disseminates the will or power, the *afflatus*, of the divine—and the harmony between the poetic theory of divine “inspiration” as expressed in the fresco, the inscription, and in Plato’s texts, on the one hand, and the contemporary belief in classical poets as divinely “inspired” theologians who receive the ancient theology directly from the Christian God, on the other hand, it seems most reasonable to read and identify the central figure as one such poet-theologian, the classical Orpheus rather than the pagan Apollo.

The inscription over the *Parnassus* is in no way hidden from view or ambiguous in its most basic meaning, a vague notion of “divine inspiration,” and scholars have recognized that the poets painted on this wall of the Stanza della Segnatura are theological in some form or manner. Thus, for example, Konrad Oberhuber wrote that “the poets”—presumably Renaissance poets—“fought for poetry to become a “divine art” (*ars divina*), “another theology” (*altera theologia*) poetically testifying to the truth by divine inspiration.”<sup>26</sup> However, none yet, Oberhuber included, have recognized the full degree to which the poets are represented as theologians in the Christian tradition, according to the Renaissance belief in the *theologicae poetae* and, specifically, as they were perceived and represented toward the end of the Italian Quattrocento and in the early Cinquecento. The poets of the *Parnassus*, Homer and Orpheus in particular, receive “inspiration” from the Divine, and thus communicate knowledge of the Divine, directly from the Divine source, rather than from any intermediary tradition. These poets,

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<sup>26</sup> Konrad Oberhuber, *Raphael: The Paintings*, (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 1999), 104.



therefore, do not participate in “another theology,” but in the One theology, as it was perceived by Renaissance Christians. This, and the particular identity of the central figure in the *Parnassus*, are of the utmost importance for the proper reading of subject and significance of the *Parnassus*, itself, but also for properly comprehending its relationship to the other frescoes in the room and the greater subject and significance of the fresco cycle as a whole.

Though some few scholars have noted the resemblance of the central figure of the *Parnassus* to the poet Orpheus as he is represented in art, none have realized the true identity of that figure as Orpheus, and, as a result, none have fully realized the significance of this figure in the *Parnassus* fresco or in relation to the figures of the *School of Athens* painted on the wall adjacent, on the east wall of the Stanza della Segnatura.<sup>27</sup> It is not so much an actual historical figure that is presented in the center of the *Parnassus* as a Renaissance construction or conception of a pseudo-historical character who was believed to have been among the earliest poets and poet-theologians of Ancient Greece. Renaissance humanists, Marsilio Ficino foremost among them,

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<sup>27</sup> Kathi Meyer-Baer saw the instrument and pose as indicative of Orpheus, but suggested that “the persons of Apollo and Orpheus merged in Raphael’s mind” and maintained that the figure was an Apollo. Meyer-Baer, “Musical Iconography,” 95. Beth Cohen posited that the composition of the *Parnassus* was loosely based on Pausanias’ description of Polygnotos’ painting of *Hades* and that the figure of Apollo corresponded to Pausanias’ description of Orpheus in that work. Cohen, “The *Rinascimento dell’Antichità*,” 32-35. Note that Luba Freedman claimed that Meyer-Baer had suggested “that Raphael actually rendered Orpheus,” while this was not Meyer-Baer’s claim, that Cohen had proposed that “Raphael represents Orpheus during his visit to Hades,” while this was not Cohen’s proposal, and that E. Verheyen had remarked “that Orpheus was never shown surrounded by Muses or poets,” though Verheyen had not made such a statement. The possibility that the central figure in the *Parnassus* is Orpheus may not so summarily be dismissed as in Freedman’s own study. Freedman, “Apollo’s Glance,” 20, 24 n. 3.

attributed a body of invocative hymns and prophetic texts to an author known as Orpheus and believed him to have been the same Orpheus who was described in Greco-Roman mythology—the son of the Muse Calliope who was trained in music by Apollo, wed to Eurydice, whom he failed to bring safely back from Hades, and eventually torn to pieces by Maenads.<sup>28</sup> The Late Antique authors Iamblichus and Proclus had placed this Orpheus at the head of a mystical and intellectual tradition that culminated, ultimately, in Plato, claiming that Orpheus’ knowledge was passed to his disciple Aglaophemus, who in turn instructed Pythagoras, whose theory of numbers informed Plato.<sup>29</sup> Renaissance philosophers recounted the same genealogy of poets and philosophers and added the idea that true theology, known to the most ancient poets, was handed down by means of this mystical and intellectual descent. Thus Ficino, who translated the *Hymns* attributed to Orpheus, wrote in his *Argumentum* of the path of theology’s descent from its origin in the studies undertaken by Hermes Trismegistus, through Orpheus and his “descendants,” to “the divine Plato”:

He [Hermes] was the first among philosophers to desert the physicists and mathematicians for the contemplation of divine things; he was the first to discuss—with great wisdom—the majesty of God, the order of demons and the transmigration of souls. That is why he is called first author of Theology. Orpheus followed him and earned the second place in ancient theology. Then Aglaophemus, initiated into the sacred teaching of Orpheus, was succeeded in theology by Pythagoras; this disciple was Philolaus, the teacher of our divine Plato. So one ancient theology, in all respects consistent within itself, was put together by six theologians in a

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<sup>28</sup> See in particular Walker, “Orpheus the Theologian,” 100-20; Klutstein, *Marsilio Ficino et la Theologie Ancienne*.

<sup>29</sup> Walker, “Orpheus the Theologian,” 100.

marvelous succession, beginning with Hermes and brought to perfection by the divine Plato.<sup>30</sup>

Here, Orpheus, his pupil Aglaophemus, and the philosophers Pythagoras and Plato were all identified as theologians, the latter by virtue of their place in the succession of inherited knowledge. Inasmuch as Orpheus is present in the *Parnassus* fresco as a “true theologian” and Pythagoras and Plato, perhaps even the intermediary Aglaophemus, are present in the *School of Athens*, adjacent to the *Parnassus*, it is possible to surmise that this very theme of the origins and inherited descent of “true theology” is represented in these two frescoes. Thus, Orpheus is present in the *Parnassus*, and there receives the divine “*afflatus*,” as a representation of the origin of the theological tradition among the Greeks. This tradition passes from Orpheus in the *Parnassus* to his pupil Aglaophemus, and subsequently to Pythagoras, pictured on the wall adjacent, in the *School of Athens*. According to this tradition, described in Renaissance philosophy and represented on the walls of the Stanza della Segnatura, the philosophers of the *School of Athens* may also be present in that space and in that cycle of decoration as theologians, as initiates into the mysteries of the Christian faith. Pythagoras, Plato, even Aristotle, Zoroaster, Euclid, and indeed the entire population of philosophers represented on that eastern wall of the Stanza della Segnatura may be present not as “pagans in the church,” but as *theologii* in the Church. Furthermore, as *theologii*, these same figures may appear also on the western wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, among their post-Advent counterparts in the *Disputa*.

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<sup>30</sup> Ficino *Argumentum*, reproduced in Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia* (Torino: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1962), 2:1836. Translation by Philippa Gould.

*Theologici Philosophi in the School of Athens and in the Disputa*

The classical figures represented in the *School of Athens* are not included in the iconographic program of the Stanza della Segnatura merely as representatives of philosophy as a discourse or pursuit that is distinct from art, jurisprudence, or theology. The classical figures of the *School of Athens* are, most of them, philosophers, but are also, by virtue of the knowledge inherited from certain of their poetic predecessors in the *Parnassus* fresco, theologians of the Christian tradition, broadly conceived. The idea that a true theological tradition existed among the Greeks of Antiquity is established in the *Parnassus* fresco, where Orpheus is depicted as an “inspired” poet-theologian, whose knowledge of the divine comes from the very “*afflatus*” of God, rather than from a more removed contact with the Judeo-Christian tradition, via Moses or Mosaic texts. Thus the representation of classical figures in the Stanza della Segnatura differs from any Tre- or early Quattrocento precedent, in which Greek philosophers are placed in relation to their Christian counterparts or even to the Christian God, but remain always outside of that tradition both visually and conceptually. The poets of the Stanza della Segnatura—Orpheus, Homer, and any others who are instructed in the “truth” that these possess from God—are full participants in the Christian tradition, equal in authority to those others of the Jewish and Christian traditions who, according to Christian belief, also received the divine “*afflatus*” and wrote from a God-given knowledge of the Christian faith. So, too, the philosophers of the Stanza della Segnatura, inasmuch as they are represented as the mystical or intellectual descendents of Orpheus or of Homer, are also full participants in the Christian tradition and may be recognized as theologians as well as philosophers.

The figures in the left foreground of the *School of Athens* represent those classical philosophers who were believed to have received and handed down the true theology that was known to the poet-theologian Orpheus. The slightly rotund figure who stands directly behind a column base and reads from a book resting on that truncated pillar may plausibly be identified as Orpheus' own disciple, Aglaophemus. (Figure 71) Konrad Oberhuber and Giovanni Reale both identified this figure as an initiate into the "Orphic mysteries" and as an intellectual predecessor of Pythagoras.<sup>31</sup> Both scholars correctly viewed the figure as a representation of the origins of philosophy and variously noted the theological significance of Orpheus as perceived by Renaissance theologians, but inasmuch as each scholar essentially viewed the *School of Athens* as separate and distinct from the *Parnassus* and failed to recognize the Orpheus of that scene as both a theologian and as the truly represented origin of philosophic wisdom, neither fully realized the identity and significance of this transitional figure in the *School of Athens*, who is a necessary step in the descent of divine wisdom and a participant in the lineage of theologians which spans the *Parnassus* and *School of Athens* frescoes. This figure may plausibly be identified as Aglaophemus, the pupil of Orpheus who instructed Pythagoras in divine matters and passed to him the Orphic principle of number symbolism.

Aglaophemus is not well known to history. He is, however, described as a pupil of Orpheus and teacher of Pythagoras in late Antique biographies of the latter and in the lists of *prisci theologii* composed by later Renaissance humanists. The most relevant

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<sup>31</sup> Giovanni Reale, *Raffaello: La "Scuola di Atene": una nuova interpretazione dell'affresco, con il cartone a fronte* (Milan: Rusconi, 1997), 11-14; Oberhuber, *Raphael: The Paintings*, 100-1.

description of Aglaophemus, that which may have defined his appearance in the *School of Athens* fresco, was included in Iamblichus' biography of Pythagoras, in a chapter in which he treated of the "divinity of Pythagoras," specified that the Pythagorean number theory was foreshadowed in the Orphic writings, and noted that Pythagoras composed his treatise on the gods with assistance from Orpheus.<sup>32</sup> In describing the origins of Pythagoras' wisdom, Iamblichus quoted from an earlier, unnamed biographer:

[T]hat Pythagoras the son of Mnesarchus was instructed in what pertains to the Gods, when he celebrated orgies in the Thracian Libethra, being initiated in them by Aglaophemus; and that Orpheus the son of Calliope, having learnt wisdom from his mother in the mountain Pangæus, said, that the eternal essence of number is the most providential principle of the universe, of heaven and earth, and the intermediate nature; and farther still, that it is the root of the permanency of divine natures, of Gods, and dæmons.<sup>33</sup>

The reference to Thracian orgies—literally the mystical rites associated with the cult of Orpheus—could have inspired the depiction of the figure of Aglaophemus in the *School of Athens* as a man with "il volto rubicondo, l'espressione particolare, e soprattutto la corona di pampini," to use Reale's description.<sup>34</sup> This reddened face, "particular expression," and crown of vine leaves, as Reale observed, have caused other scholars to seek a Dionysian association for this figure and to identify the figure as a philosopher who advocated the pursuit of pleasure.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, such a reading isolates the figure and

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<sup>32</sup> *Iamblichus' Life of Pythagoras, or Pythagoric Life*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: John M. Watkins, 1926), 71-83.

<sup>33</sup> *Iamblichus*, 78.

<sup>34</sup> Reale, *Scuola di Atene*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Reale, *Scuola di Atene*, 12.

reduces him to one in a series of philosophical exemplars, *uomini famosi*, as it were.<sup>36</sup>

The figure's physical appearance may bear a certain resemblance to one of the patron's most trusted advisors, Tomasso Inghirami,<sup>37</sup> and his ivy wreath may have been intended to associate him with the rites of the Orphic mystics rather than with any of the more pleasurable pursuits of Bacchus, at least in the minds of those in the intended audience who, like the learned Inghirami and his contemporaries, may have been so disposed as to recognize and interpret the motif.<sup>38</sup> As Aglaophemus, the Orphic initiate, informed theologian, and practitioner who passed divine knowledge to Pythagoras and to his descendents, in turn, this figure plays a more significant role in the *School of Athens* and in the fresco cycle as a whole.

The identifications of Aglaophemus and of the greater theme of theology's descent from Orpheus through Aglaophemus to Pythagoras permit also a more accurate reading of the attributes and activity associated with the figure of Pythagoras in the

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<sup>36</sup> Ingrid Rowland, "The Intellectual Background of the *School of Athens*: Tracking Divine Wisdom in the Rome of Julius II," in Marcia Hall, ed., *Raphael's "School of Athens"* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158: "To the left a chubby Epicurus, crowned in the ivy that signified participation in a drinking party but engrossed in a book, may also be identified with a fair degree of probability, his back to the Pythagoreans and Socratics, and indeed to the rest of the school. Like Diogenes and Heraclitus, he, too, is lost in his own world of contemplation; unlike them, he sees no conflict between philosophy and indulging his senses."

<sup>37</sup> This was noted by Rowland, "Intellectual Background," 158-60; Reale, *Scuola di Atene*, 13-14; and Oberhuber, *Raphael: The Paintings*, 100-1.

<sup>38</sup> Oberhuber made the point that after Inghirami's death, Cardinal Sadoletto made him a character in a treatise in which he, Sadoletto, maintained that "everything later written was already contained in the mystical and mythological writings of Orpheus and his followers." Oberhuber, *Raphael: The Paintings*, 100-1. While this is not proper proof that Inghirami, himself, was interested in or knowledgeable of Orphism, it does show that his contemporaries were so interested and devoted.

*School of Athens*. (Figure 72) This is the figure sitting near Aglaophemus, but closer to the center of the composition, who rather studiously writes in a book while others near him crane their necks as if to see what he has written. This is the figure Vasari had mistakenly named St. Matthew, who was, in Vasari's interpretation, expounding the tablet before him, which had been brought from the astrologers by one of "several very lovely angels." Surprisingly, there may be more accuracy in Vasari's reading than first appears: while Vasari's "St. Matthew" is Pythagoras and the tablet before him is not brought from the astrologers on the opposite side of the scene, the action that Vasari described and attributed to "St. Matthew" is accurately observed and very much in keeping with the particulars of Iamblichus' description of the Pythagoras' reception of Orphic knowledge. The tablet before Pythagoras is commonly described as belonging to him and bearing a diagram that, in some mysterious manner, expresses the essentials of his number theory.<sup>39</sup> In his biography of Pythagoras, however, Iamblichus had specified that the Pythagorean number-theory was derived from Orphic texts. Wrote Iamblichus:

If, therefore, any one wishes to learn what were the sources whence these men derived so much piety, it must be said, that a perspicuous paradigm of the Pythagoric theology according to numbers is in a certain respect to be found in the writings of Orpheus. Nor it is to be doubted, that Pythagoras receiving auxiliaries from Orpheus, composed his treatise Concerning the Gods....<sup>40</sup>

In the *School of Athens* fresco, Pythagoras does not appear to own the table before him—it is held by a youthful figure—one of Vasari's "angels"—who looks back over his shoulder

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<sup>39</sup> On the tablet, see Marcia Hall, *Raphael's "School of Athens"* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 33-34.

<sup>40</sup> *Iamblichus*, 77.



and Pythagoras', as if toward the turbaned figure behind them, or even to Aglaophemus, who is farther from the youth, but directly in his line of sight. As in Vasari's interpretation, Pythagoras seems to "expound" this tablet—he faces the tablet, but writes in his own book, as if interpreting into words what is there represented in diagram form. The action is confusing, even confounding if the tablet is thought to belong to Pythagoras, but appropriate, even illustrative of the theme of Pythagoras as a philosopher-theologian who interprets the number-theory of Orpheus and makes this the basis of his own understanding of divine theology.

Though Konrad Oberhuber wrote much that is true, or appears to be near the truth in regard to the representation and meaning of figures and themes in the *School of Athens*, he nevertheless erred significantly in his reading of the relationship between the figures in the left foreground, the Orphic initiates and Pythagoreans, and those in the center background of the composition, Plato and Aristotle. Oberhuber noted that figures ascend the steps from the foreground to the background on the right side of the composition, but not on the left, and read this as an attempt on the part of the artist to isolate the Pythagoreans from Plato both spatially and conceptually. Thus he wrote:

From behind Archimedes, a white-clad youth mounts to the school of Aristotle, while an older philosopher descends. From the sciences it is possible to proceed to philosophy proper or vice versa. From Pythagoras, on the other hand, one cannot easily arrive at Plato's discipline. Pythagoras' wisdom was complete knowledge in itself.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, nothing could be further from the truth. The entire message of the *School of Athens* depends on the perceived continuity between the figures in the left foreground and

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<sup>41</sup> Oberhuber, *Raphael: The Paintings*, 101.

that figure in the left center position, Plato himself, and this continuity is expressed both in the lineage of the *prisci theologii* as given by Ficino and in the figure of a philosopher standing to the right of Pythagoras, directly between him and his heir-once-removed, as it were, Plato. This figure, whose pronounced torsion anticipates that of Raphael's celebrated *Galatea* by only a couple of years, turns his head over one shoulder to gaze down at Pythagoras and the book in which Pythagoras writes, even while he holds his own book on the other side of his body, away from his face, in a direct line between the Orphic tablet at Pythagoras' feet and the figure of Plato at the center of the composition. (Figure 73) His position near Pythagoras and his pose, at once facing that older philosopher and turning his body and work toward those philosophers who came later, chronologically, and are represented further in the depth of the scene, suggest that he is a pupil of Pythagoras and predecessor of the Socratics or of Plato. He has been tentatively identified by Raphael scholars as Empedocles, who did hold such a place in the history of Greek philosophy.<sup>42</sup> As there are no motifs or attributes that reveal this figure's particular identity, merely his position and pose. He could as easily be another of Pythagoras' students, Philolaus, who was named by Ficino as the intermediary *theologus* between Pythagoras and Plato. To paraphrase Ficino, this disciple *is* Philolaus, the teacher of our divine Plato. As such, he continues the unbroken descent and inheritance of divine theology, which proceeds then to Plato, shown standing in the left center of the

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<sup>42</sup> Passavant saw this figure as the liaison between Pythagoras and Heraclitus and a transition to the school of Socrates, above / behind in the composition, and therefore named him as Anaxagoras. Passavant, *Raphael d'Urbino*, 123. Reale noted that he has been called Empedocles, but suggested that he could alternately be Parmenides. Reale, *Scuola di Atene*, 18-19.

composition. Though Raphael, admittedly, did not paint figures ascending and descending the stairs on the left side of the *School of Athens*, there is no visual or conceptual barrier to the implied passage of knowledge or wisdom, and this, in fact, may be the very reason for the absence of any additional figures between Philolaus and Plato—there are no intermediaries between these figures in the lineage of theology’s descent.

Both Plato and Aristotle, his pupil and heir, appear in the *School of Athens* as theologians as well as philosophers. For this reason, they may appear also in the fresco opposite, commonly known by the title *Disputa*. (Figure 74) Their figures have not, in recorded history, been recognized among the more easily identified or categorized Christian theologians who populate the lower portion of that scene, the earthly realm that is home to novices, initiates, friars, monks, bishops, cardinals, popes, and the four Church Fathers: Gregory, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine. There is precedent, however, for the repeated presence of a figure on multiple walls of the Stanza della Segnatura—Dante stands with Virgil behind Homer in the *Parnassus*, and he appears again, with his same characteristic profile, wearing the same red cloak and cap, and crowned with a poet’s laurel wreath, in the *Disputa*, where he stands behind the rather more glorious figure of Pope Sixtus IV. (Figure 75) If Dante, who was beloved as a poet and respected as a theologian, appears twice in the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura, once among the poets and again with the theologians, so also may Plato and Aristotle appear twice in the fresco cycle, once among the philosophers and again with the theologians, if they, like Dante, are recognized as philosophers and theologians, both.

The figure of Aristotle may more easily be recognized in the *Disputa* than that of his teacher, Plato. He stands to the left side of the composition on the second of the broad

steps that rise from the level of the foreground, with his back turned toward the viewer and facing and gesturing into the depth of the painted space. (Figure 76) This figure has largely been ignored or glossed over in studies of the Stanza della Segnatura.<sup>43</sup> He is not named in an inscribed halo, as are St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventura, and the Church Fathers. His nondescript clothing does not reveal his particular association or affiliation with any order or rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. His facial features are almost entirely obscured from view. This figure is significant to both the composition and the action of the *Disputa*, however, and is singled out from the nameless ecclesiastics who populate the left side of the *Disputa* by virtue of his particular iconographic representation—he is one of the relatively few figures of the lower register, ten of the forty-three figures, who either hold books or have books lying at their feet. This motif, together with the particulars of his representation and the action and meaning signified in his gesture, reveal him to be none other than that great philosopher, Aristotle, here revealing to the initiates the means of approaching the divine through proper moral behavior.

The figure in the *Disputa* here identified as Aristotle stands before a group of three youths—initiates or novices in the Christian faith—and directs them with a gesture of his hand to give their attention to a book which lies at the feet of the seated Father, Pope Gregory. This book is identified by an inscription written across its fore edge—L[iber] MORALIVM—as a representative volume of Gregory’s *Commentary on the Book of Job*,

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<sup>43</sup> Hagen identified him as Scot Eriugena and Pfeiffer identified him as Origen. See Giovanni Reale *Raffaello: La “Disputa”: una interpretazione filosofica e teologica dell’affresco con la prima presentazione analitica dei singoli personaggi e dei particolari simbolici e allegorici emblematici* (Milan: Rusconi, 1998), 62-63.

also known as the *Moralia* or the *Magna Moralia*. The youths, attentive to the master's direction, react in surprise and wonder, throwing open their hands, opening wide their eyes, and craning to see the Church Father who wrote that treatise on morality. Their master, the standing figure, must, himself, be an author—the volumes at his feet attest to this. These books, however, bear no inscriptions and do not openly reveal the identity of their author. He, this figure, may reasonably be identified as some philosopher or theologian who, like Gregory, wrote on morality or ethics, and therefore achieved through his writing that same effect that is signified by his gesture in the *Disputa*. Could he not be Aristotle, philosopher of ethics and morality, author of a multi-volume work that was known by the very same title as Gregory's great study of morals, the *Magna Moralia*? Indeed, this Aristotle bears a strong resemblance to the Aristotle of the *School of Athens*. Both are bearded and have short, ruddy-brown hair that curls into rings at its ends. Both have a strong forehead with a slightly prominent brow. Both wear blue cloaks over their robes, though admittedly these robes differ in color—the *School of Athens* Aristotle wears a brown robe that reaches to his ankles and is trimmed in gold; the *Disputa* Aristotle wears a shorter emerald green robe beneath his blue cloak—which difference may, conceivably, owe more to the compositional distribution of color than to particular iconography. Furthermore, both figures take the same pose and make the same gesture, slight variations notwithstanding—both stand with their weight on the right leg, proper, with the right arm bent at the elbow and the forearm extended, and with the head turned slightly to the right. Thus, the similarity of pose and gesture, of facial appearance and clothing provide visual clues to the identity of the figure, as do the placement of the figure in relation to Pope Gregory and meaning of his gesture in relation to the other

figures near him. This is Aristotle, the author of the *Magna Moralia*, who here directs the assembled youths to consider Gregory's work own *Moralia*, thereby leading the Christian initiate from divinely inspired philosophy to God-given theology and, at the same time, reinforcing the idea that moral behavior is an essential component of the Christian's approach toward the Divine.

If Aristotle appears on the left side of the *Disputa*, standing among the initiates some short distance from the Fathers of the Christian Church, his teacher, Plato, appears on the right side of the scene, standing even in the very space between St. Ambrose and the altar that supports the consecrated Host. (Figure 77) Like Aristotle, Plato may be recognized from a general resemblance to his representation in the *School of Athens*, opposite, and from a similarity of gesture. Both representations of Plato show him as an older, balding man with a long grey beard. There are slight differences in their physical appearance and in their dress. The Plato of the *School of Athens* has slightly more and longer hair on his balding head than the Plato of the *Disputa*, and the Plato of the *School of Athens* wears a salmon-pink cloak over a heather-purple robe that is trimmed in azure blue, while the Plato of the *Disputa* is wrapped in a green robe and blue cloak that are both so dark as to nearly prove indistinguishable. The latter difference may certainly be attributed to the compositional distribution of color. The high value pastels worn by the figure in the *School of Athens* cause him to stand out from the background of that scene and from the figures surrounding him, as is appropriate for the compositional and iconographic focus of that fresco. The same colors would not fit the mostly primary palette that is used in the immediate surroundings of the figure in the *Disputa*—the red, gold, blue, white, and small patches of green that clothe the Fathers and the altar—and

would not only bring to the fore a figure who properly belongs in the depth of the scene, but would also obscure the very expressive and significant gesture made by Ambrose's hands, which are, in the actual painting, easily read even from a distance because of their placement against Plato's dark robe.

It is the gesture made by the figure standing immediately to the right of the altar in the *Disputa* that is most characteristic of Plato, as Raphael represents him, and reveals his identity. Like the figure of Plato in the *School of Athens* (figure 78), this figure raises his right arm, twisting the forearm so that the palm of the hand faces inward, toward his body, and points upward with the index finger. Giovanni Reale recognized this similarity of gesture and, following the lead of J. Braun, suggested that the figure in the *Disputa* was the philosopher Justin Martyr, a Christian theologian whose theories and methods were similar to Plato's.<sup>44</sup> Reale, who was perhaps unable to look beyond the prescribed populations of each scene, stopped short of identifying the figure as Plato, settling, instead, on characterizing him as a Platonist. There is, in fact, no reason why this figure could not be Plato, and every reason to believe that he is precisely that philosopher.

The figure of Plato in the *Disputa* does not stand alone as an allegorical sign or self-referential icon. Rather, he actively participates in the action of the *Disputa*. Plato is one of only three figures in the lower register of the scene, the earthly realm, who demonstrate any awareness of the heavenly figures depicted above, in the upper registers, where the full Trinity of the Christian Godhead is represented, together with a host of

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<sup>44</sup> Reale, *Disputa*, 65-66.

angels, Mary and John the Baptist, and twelve enthroned figures drawn from the Old Testament Prophets and Patriarchs and the Christian Saints and Apostles. Plato does not look on these, but points to them, revealing to the viewer, and to Ambrose, his knowledge of things Divine. Ambrose reacts to Plato's gesture by looking up, and is represented in that very moment of comprehension, as, with his hands spreading wide in overwhelming awe, he first beholds God and his kingdom. The monumentality of Plato's gesture, of its significance as a sign of that figure's own knowledge, and of its effect on Ambrose do not permit any lesser identification of that figure's identity. Ambrose does not, in the *Disputa* or in the philosophy from which it is derived, achieve the realization of God through the agency of Justin Martyr or any such figure of secondary import. Two paths lead toward the Divine and grant admission to the mysteries: the path of moral philosophy, or proper ethical behavior while in this lower realm, which is represented in the *School of Athens* by Aristotle and in the *Disputa* by the gesture of Aristotle toward the books of Gregory, and the path of dialectic, which more properly concerns things divine than the affairs of this world, and which is represented in the *School of Athens* by Plato and in the *Disputa* by Plato's gesture and the reaction it affects from Ambrose.

On the Concord of Pico and the Stanza della Segnatura:  
The Parallel Paths of Dialectic and Moral Philosophy

The themes and subjects represented in the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura find significant expression also in Pico della Mirandola's 1486 treatise and intended oration *On the Dignity of Man*. In that work, Pico consulted the "theology of the ancients" as well as Christian and Jewish authorities in his attempt to comprehend the mysteries of the



Christian faith and determine the means of achieving the dignity and glory of the angels. In so doing, he signaled his belief that the classical poets and philosophers, those whom he consults, were equal in authority to their Christian and Jewish counterparts, that they, like these, were initiated into the mysteries of the Christian faith, which could then be gleaned from their works as from the Bible and from Biblical exegesis.<sup>45</sup> Thus the depiction, in the Stanza della Segnatura, of classical poets and philosophers as theologians who are, like their Christian and Jewish counterparts, divinely inspired and initiated into the Christian mysteries has a certain precedent in Pico's oration. So, also, the depiction of moral philosophy and of dialectic as parallel paths leading toward the Divine has a precedent in Pico's text. Pico singled out these two practices or pursuits, specifically, as the means by which the body and soul, respectively, are purified in the earliest step in the process of emulating the angels and perfecting man.<sup>46</sup> This idea is expressed repeatedly in his treatise, such that the idea that moral philosophy and dialectic act as purgative and preparatory means toward the purification of the soul may be identified as a central theme and essential component of his philosophical system. These were, for Pico, the initial and fundamental processes by which man first approaches his own perfection and that of the Divine. Thus, for example, he wrote:

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<sup>45</sup> Pico della Mirandola *On the Dignity of Man*, as in Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Hetaplus*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis (Indianapolis, New York, Kansas City: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 13.

<sup>46</sup> Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, 9: "Therefore, by rivaling the life of a cherub upon the earth, by confining the onslaughts of the affections by means of moral science, and by shaking off the mist of reason by means of dialectic, as if washing off the filth of ignorance and vice, let us purge the soul, that the affections may not audaciously run riot, nor an imprudent reason sometime rave. Then, over a soul which has been set in order

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In the decoration of the Stanza della Segnatura, as in Pico's treatise, the concept of moral philosophy and dialectic as parallel paths leading toward human perfection and knowledge of the Divine is a defining theme, even the fundamental subject that is expressed in the program of decoration, as a whole. The concept is expressed in the actions performed by Aristotle and Plato in the *Disputa*, in the division of Church Fathers and their respective actions in that same fresco, and in the greater division and distribution of figures and subjects throughout the entire room.

Plato stands in the *Disputa* with those Fathers of the Church—Ambrose and Augustine—who could be seen as having pursued divine knowledge through dialectic. Augustine was himself a rhetorician and a student of classical philosophy, and came to theology only after his own doubts on the nature of the Christian God were allayed by Ambrose's well reasoned explanations.<sup>48</sup> Though Augustine, in the *Disputa*, does not see God, his master, Ambrose, follows Plato's lead—literally turns his eyes in the direction signaled by Plato's upraised finger—and, from dialectic, as it were, is given the

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<sup>47</sup> Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Augustine *Confessions* 4:2-4.

opportunity to see God. Furthermore, those other ecclesiastics who stand with Plato on the right side of the *Disputa* may also be classed as those who sought the Divine through reason. St. Thomas Aquinas, author of the *Summa Theologiae*, stands on that side, and Sixtus IV, who is depicted not only as pope, but as the author of a scholarly treatise, symbolized by the book at his feet.

The Fathers and ecclesiastics of the other side of the *Disputa* are properly categorized as those who concerned themselves with moral behavior among Christians and within the Christian Church. Gregory is enthroned there, the *Moralia* at his feet, and Jerome, who made the Bible accessible to the Church in the Latin Vulgate and counseled his Christian contemporaries, those in the world, with epistolary advice. These figures do not look up to heaven, they do not aspire directly to the contemplation of the Divine, but consider God's earthly presence, the consecrated Host that is before them on the altar. Thus, Gregory does not gaze upward, but across, to the Host, and Jerome, lost in the book on his knee, is directed to turn his attentions there by the gesture of the figure beside him. Similarly, the figures gathered into the space behind these Fathers are those Church members who restrict their behavior through holy orders, and thus seek God through proper codes of morality. These are the monks and friars of the Church, and the bishops who lead the laity. The artist or author of the Stanza della Segnatura's program did allow that this practice, as well as the dialectic approach to God, permitted the realization of perfection and led its practitioner to see God, as Ambrose does—the leftmost figure in the *Disputa*, an aging man in the habit of a Dominican monk, lifts his eyes to heaven and, like Ambrose, is aware of the glory revealed in the upper registers of the *Disputa*, though

he does not, in his expression, exhibit the awe or wonder that overtakes the Father of the Church.

The *Disputa* is divided by sides into a study of the parallel paths of dialectic and moral philosophy. So also is the *School of Athens*. Plato stands on the left side of that fresco, which is the same side of the room that he occupies in the *Disputa*, and, with finger raised toward the Idea or toward God, signals the path of dialectic—pure logic or mental reason, as opposed to worldly experience—as a means toward approaching the Truth. Aristotle, standing again on “his” side of the room, gestures toward the world and signals the path of moral philosophy—the practice of ethics, which is described in the book in his hand—as a means of constricting one’s behavior and approaching the proper end.

As the *Disputa* and *School of Athens* are divided according to the parallel paths of dialectic and moral philosophy, so decoration of the entire room is arranged according to this program. The *Parnassus* wall properly depicts the poets as theologians and establishes a path of true knowledge, or knowledge of the Truth, from its divine origin to the philosophers, to Plato in the *School of Athens*, adjacent. Furthermore, this fresco establishes the essential principal that dialectic is not merely a human pursuit, i.e. that poet, philosopher, and theologian do not approach God through their own reason or agency, but from the inflowing “*afflatus*” of the divine. This, after all, is Plato’s own argument in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Ion*. Thus this scene justifies dialectic as a theological rather than a purely philosophical pursuit, as a practice that is inspired by the Divine and ultimately leads back to the Divine, as shown in the action of Plato in the *Disputa*. Jurisprudence, on the other hand and on the remaining wall, is nothing other

than the practice of moral philosophy, the establishment of just rule and governance, which is at once forceful, temperate, and prudent, under systems of civil and ecclesiastical law. The iconographic program of decoration that encompasses all four walls of the Stanza della Segnatura thus divides neatly into two parallel and concordant themes, the art of dialectic as a divinely inspired path toward the recognition of divine Truths and the realization of Divine Glory and the practice of moral philosophy as a similar means toward approaching the Divine.

#### On the Development of the Iconographic Program of the Stanza della Segnatura

The Stanza della Segnatura has been plausibly identified as the library of Pope Julius II, and the frescoes that decorate its walls have been long been viewed as a representation of the four divisions or branches of knowledge represented in a humanist library.<sup>49</sup> It is possible that the fresco program was planned, even begun as an illustration, as it were, of the faculties of theology, philosophy, poetry, and jurisprudence, with the four walls of the chamber populated with representatives of each faculty as in a *uomini famosi* cycle. Francis Ames-Lewis has shown, however, that Raphael exhibited in other significant instances a tendency to change not only the poses of figures or particulars of

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<sup>49</sup> Shearman reviewed the documentary evidence and concluded that the Stanza della Segnatura was the most plausible location of Julius's library, though he acknowledged on page 383 of his study that the possibility remained that the Pope's collection could have been housed in the Torre Borgia. John Shearman, "The Vatican Stanze: Functions and Decoration," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 57 (1971), 369-424. On the relationship of the frescoes to the subjects represented in Raphael's frescoes, see Wickhoff, who first developed the concept. Franz Wickhoff, "Die Bibliothek Julius' II," *Jarbuch der königlich preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 4 (1893), 49-64.

composition but even the very essentials of subject and iconography as he developed a project through sketches, studies, and *modelli*.<sup>50</sup> The iconographic program of the Stanza della Segnatura may have developed in a similar manner.

Raphael appears to have presented an early concept for the Stanza della Segnatura program, presumably to his patron or to the patron's representative, in a set of preliminary *modelli* which defined the general themes or subjects and certain essentials of composition for each of the four frescoes to be painted on the walls of the room.<sup>51</sup> In subsequent studies, however, Raphael reworked and revised his original concept, making changes not only to the composition of individual scenes but also to the very subjects and themes represented in the program as a whole. John Shearman has already described the transformation of the *Jurisprudence* fresco from a planned *Judgment* scene, drawn from the Apocalypse, into the scene actually painted in the Stanza della Segnatura.<sup>52</sup> Raphael also transformed the *Parnassus* and *Disputa* frescoes, though not as radically, by repositioning key figures and changing the attributes which identified these and other figures, including Aristotle and Plato in the *Disputa* and central figure of the *Parnassus*,

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<sup>50</sup> Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Draftsman Raphael* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 2-9, 50-59.

<sup>51</sup> On the preliminary *modelli* for the Segnatura program, see Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 73-76, figs. 86, 90, 93. A study of the left half of the *Disputa* (Windsor, Royal Library, 12732) could have been produced as a *modello* for that fresco. A *modello* for an Apocalypse scene (Paris, Louvre, 3866r) has been identified as an early study for the *Jurisprudence* wall. Marcantonio Raimondi's print after a drawing by Raphael of the *Parnassus* could represent an early *modello* for that scene. This is preserved as London, British Museum, 1973-II-8.

<sup>52</sup> John Shearman, "Raphael's Unexecuted Projects for the Stanze," in Georg Kauffmann, ed., *Walter Friedlaender zum 90. Geburtstag: eine Festgabe seiner europäischen Schüler, Freunde und Verehrer* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1965), 158-80, in particular 165-66.

who may have looked more like Apollo in Raphael's early *modelli*, but is more clearly Orpheus in later studies and in the fresco as executed. In this, the second period of Raphael's activity on the Stanza della Segnatura project, between the presentation of *modelli* and the actual execution of the frescoes, the iconographic program of that project of decoration was developed and changed dramatically, such that it became something greater than a division of faculties or a glorified *uomini famosi* cycle, such that it became, instead, a new Renaissance statement on the relations between classical and Christian figures and on the place of classical poetry and philosophy in the Christian approach toward the Divine.

There is no surviving study or *modello* for the *Parnassus* by Raphael's own hand in which the central figure of the composition is clearly or irrefutably marked as Apollo. Rather, an engraving made by Marcantonio Raimondi after or from a Raphael drawing of the *Parnassus* shows the central figure in a pose and with attributes that are consistent with the typical representation of that god and allows the possibility that Raphael, himself, had originally intended that the central figure of the *Parnassus* be Apollo. (Figure 79) In other instances, Raimondi executed his prints directly from drawings or *modelli* provided by Raphael, and there is every reason to believe that such a model-copy relationship is represented also in Raimondi's engraving of the *Parnassus*.<sup>53</sup> Raimondi's print does not correspond in every particular to the *Parnassus* fresco, as executed, but is closer in certain significant details to a nude study for the *Parnassus*, now in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (figure 80), which, itself, includes other

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<sup>53</sup> Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 8.

elements not present in the Raimondi print but appearing in the finished fresco. This makes it possible to determine the sequence in which Raimondi's model, the Oxford nude study, and the fresco, itself, were executed, to speculate on Raphael's original intentions for the scene, and to track the changes he made to composition and iconography.

Leaving aside obvious differences between the works—the absence of Sappho and her compositional foil from both of the works on paper and the presence of putti or cupids, as Vasari described them, in the Raimondi print—one may observe that the Raimondi print does not include a standing female figure with her back to the viewer on the right side of the composition, while she is present in both the nude study and the painted *Parnassus*. The Raimondi print could not reproduce a drawing or study made between the execution of the Oxford nude study and the fresco, itself, as the print would then by necessity include this female figure, who is constant in those latter works. Furthermore, the very existence of a nude study executed after the model for Raimondi's print may suggest that Raimondi's model was nothing less than a presentation *modello*—a relatively complete study of the composition and essential figures, fully clothed in appropriate garb, i.e. not a *garzone* study. The existence of later nude and *garzone* studies shows, however, that Raimondi's model subsequently reworked through the various stages of production, including a nude study of all the figures together and a *garzone* study of the central figure in an entirely different pose and with different attributes.

One of the primary differences between Raimondi's print, on the one hand, and both the Oxford study and the *Parnassus* fresco, on the other, is in the representation of the central figure. In Raimondi's print, the central figure is fully clothed in a cloak and tunic, is posed with his head at a slight tilt, but looking outward, toward the viewer, and



holds a lyre. With these attributes, he is, or could be Apollo, the classical god of music and poetry. In the Oxford print, however, the lyre has been replaced by a *lira da braccio* and the figure looks upward, as he does in the *Parnassus* fresco. This change is neither slight nor insignificant and could not have been made without careful consideration. Not only did this change require the artist to reconsider the pose and position of the man playing such an instrument—a drawing now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, (figure 81) attests to Raphael's concern over the matter—but, inasmuch as this change of instruments involved the very attribute of the central figure, it must be read either as a change in that figure's identity through the change in attribute, as an attempt to clarify the figure's identity by removing an ambiguous attribute, or, conversely, as an attempt to obscure or cloud the figure's identity by introducing just such an attribute. The latter possibility is difficult to entertain—what reason would Raphael have to deliberately obscure his representation of Apollo by replacing the traditional attribute of that figure, the lyre, with an anachronistic *lira da braccio*? It would seem, instead, either that Raphael had intended the figure to be Apollo and presented that god as a patron deity of the poets in his early *modello*, perhaps in keeping with a program that required only that the scene signify the faculty of poetry in a broad sense, and subsequently changed his identity as the greater subject of the fresco cycle developed into something more syncretic, or that the figure was never an Apollo at all, but some other person who, like Apollo, could be represented as playing a lyre or, unlike that god, as playing a *lira da braccio*, and that Raphael chose the latter option precisely as a means of avoiding any possibility that the figure would be misinterpreted as the pagan god.

Raphael did not fail in his attempts to transform the figure. The figure, as painted, can not be Apollo, for the very reasons given in the discussion above—he does not hold Apollo’s instrument and he is not, himself, a source of divine inspiration, as Apollo would be in this context, but looks toward a Divine source that is outside of his person. Raphael’s Orpheus—for he is that poet rather than the pagan god—has nevertheless been mistakenly identified as Apollo for nearly five hundred years. The fault lies not with Raphael, however, and not wholly with Giorgio Vasari, who first identified the figure as Apollo, but with those authors and scholars who have failed to recognize Vasari’s source or to question his assertion that the figure of the *Parnassus*, whom he did not describe, was that god. Vasari, as it happens, did not describe figures and motifs from Raphael’s painted fresco, but those he saw in Raimondi’s print, executed from an early *modello* for the *Parnassus*, in which the central figure did appear with the attributes of Apollo. This is revealed in his description of “a number of naked cupids... floating above, holding laurel branches, of which they make garlands and scatter them over the mount.”<sup>54</sup> These cupids appear in the Raimondi print and could have been present in its model, but are absent from any of Raphael’s subsequent studies and from his painted fresco. Either Vasari had not seen the actual fresco and erred in assuming that the details visible in Raimondi’s print accurately reproduced Raphael’s work as executed, or, if he had seen the fresco, Vasari compromised his memory by working more directly from the Raimondi print while composing his description of the *Parnassus*. Either way, Vasari erred. Those critics and scholars who have followed Vasari in believing that the central figure of the

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<sup>54</sup> Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 315.

*Parnassus* is, in fact, Apollo have, presumably, been unaware of Vasari's dependence on the Raimondi print, of the changes made by Raphael between the execution of the model for that print and the execution of the fresco, itself, and of the full significance of those changes with regard to the subject and iconography of the *Parnassus* fresco. Ironically, scholars have largely perpetuated an interpretation of the *Parnassus* fresco which is based on early preparatory drawings and represents only a preliminary stage in the development of the iconographic program of the Stanza della Segnatura frescoes.

It is difficult to determine with any certainty what Raphael had intended to represent in his early *modelli* and what iconographic program had been originally proposed for the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura. If Raimondi's print does faithfully reproduce Raphael's *modello* for the *Parnassus*, that *modello* could have been a proposal for a relatively straightforward and rather traditional representation of Poetry, with a patron deity, Apollo, in the center of the composition surrounded by representatives and exemplars. Such a scene would largely reproduce the formula represented by Pinturicchio's frescoes of the Liberal Arts painted in the Vatican's Borgia Apartments. (Figures 57-59) Alternately, the figure in the center of Raphael's *modello* could have been an Orpheus even at that early stage of production. Orpheus, like Apollo and like the figure in the center of Raimondi's print, could be represented as a clothed figure holding a lyre—he appears with these attributes in a grisaille medallion on the socle of the Cappella Nova in Orvieto Cathedral. (Figure 33) If the central figure was Apollo and the scene was a representation of Poetry and its practitioners, the greater iconographic program proposed in Raphael's preliminary *modelli* could have been a more traditional cycle presenting those pursuits or faculties which are represented in a

humanist library. If this was the case, the changes introduced into the *Parnassus* scene and into the *Disputa* after the presentation of *modelli* transformed the iconographic program into something radically different. It is possible, also, that the iconographic program of the Stanza della Segnatura frescoes was distinct, original, even radical from its very inception—that the *Parnassus* figure was always an Orpheus and always a participant in the line of true theologians—and that the changes made by Raphael were intended to develop and clarify themes and subjects that were present even at the presentation stage.

Just as Raphael introduced or developed syncretic themes in the preparatory studies executed for the *Parnassus*, so also he introduced or developed syncretic themes in his studies for the *Disputa*. More studies and preparatory drawings for the *Disputa* are extant today than for any of the other three frescoes which decorate the walls of the Stanza della Segnatura. This has been variously explained by scholars, either as evidence that Raphael began with the *Disputa* and, because of his relative inexperience, struggled to resolve issues of composition inherent in that work—i.e. that he expressed in these drawings a youthful *difacilità* that was in marked contrast to the *facilità* with which he executed that greater work, the *School of Athens*—or simply as an accident of survival.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Joseph Crowe and Giovanni Cavalcasselle, *Raphael: His Life and Works* (1882-1885; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), who took the drawings for the *Disputa* as evidence of Raphael's youth and inexperience and traced, in them, the "traditions that were potent in their effect on him, when he first composed the *Disputa*," including the "spirit of Fra Bartolommeo" and Leonardo da Vinci (pages 29-31), and who wrote of the *Disputa* as "the result of many compromises" and noted "the elements of disharmony which remained in the *Disputa* to the end" (page 37). Crowe and Cavalcasselle used the term "difficulties" on page 54: "The difficulties which required to be overcome in the *Disputa*..." The *School of Athens* was, in their words, "simply the finest, best balanced, and most perfect arrangement of figures that

While either or both of these are possible as contributing factors, it is also possible that a large number of the drawings executed in the preparation of the *Disputa* represent Raphael's process of developing an original and nuanced iconographic content.

The earliest extant drawings for the *Disputa*—a preliminary *modello* now in the Royal Library at Windsor (figure 82) and a slightly later study divided between the Ashmolean Museum and the Musée Condé, Chantilly (figures 83 and 84)—establish the fundamental subject and composition of the *Disputa*, but for the most part do not so distinguish individual figures by attribute that any conclusive statements can be made with regard to the particular iconography of the scene.<sup>56</sup> It is not possible, in these works, to determine the identities of the figures who populate the lower register, even to distinguish them as classical or Christian, philosopher or theologian, and thus it is not possible to determine with any certainty whether Raphael intended, at this stage of production, the syncretic themes which would be developed in later studies and represented, ultimately, in the painted fresco.

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was ever put together by the genius of the Italian revival, and the scene in which the action is set is the most splendid display of monumental architecture that was ever made in the 16<sup>th</sup> century” (page 59). Ames-Lewis noted that more drawings survive for the *Disputa* than for all other walls of the Stanza della Segnatura together, but, with the use of the conditional “if,” allowed that this may reflect survival rather than production—“If survival reflects production,”—and noted, further, that Raphael could have used the solution to the composition of the *Disputa* as a model for further work, in which likely case the comparison between frescoes in terms of difficulty and *facilità* would not properly apply. Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 73.

<sup>56</sup> The *modello* is Windsor, Royal Library, 12732, reproduced in Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 79 fig. 86. The study is preserved as Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 542 and Chantilly, Musée Condé, Fr VIII, 45—Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 77 figs. 88 and 89, respectively.

The philosophers of the *Disputa* made their debut, as it were, in a *modello* for the left foreground of the composition, now in the collection of the British Museum, London.<sup>57</sup> (Figure 85) The figures in this drawing are suitably distinguished by the manner of their clothing, and two in particular may be plausibly identified as philosophers rather than clergy. One stands to the left of the page with two members of the clergy—a monk or friar and a bishop, who are so identified by the particulars of their costume. (Figure 86) The third member of this group, who turns his back to the viewer even as he steps deeper into the composition, wears the flowing robes of a philosopher rather than any manner of ecclesiastical habit or vestment and shows his curling locks to the viewer, in marked contrast to his companions, who wear a tonsure and a miter, respectively. This figure turns to face the friar at his side, but gestures into the composition with his left arm and, with his hand turned palm-up and fingers outstretched, he directs his companion to consider the upper register of the composition, implied beyond the boundary of the page. The hand, itself, is sufficiently detailed as to preclude any confusion or ambiguity over which figure to whom it belongs—the bishop seen between the philosopher and the friar seems to turn his right arm in that direction, also, but the ring and little finger of the hand are visible on its front side, respective to the viewer, and that pose can only be held by the philosopher. The friar, for his own part, reacts to the philosopher's gesture by raising his head toward heaven, or toward God in the register above, and spreading his own arms in revelation and surprise.

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<sup>57</sup> London, British Museum, 1900-8-24-108. Reproduced in Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 79 pl. XI.

A second philosopher may be present in the London *modello*, standing to the right of another bishop, immediately behind the seated figure of Saint Gregory. (Figure 87)

This figure appears to wear some form of head covering and presumably a robe. He is otherwise distinguished only by his beard, by his pose and placement in the composition, and by his interaction with the figure beside him, with the bishop. Indeed, the bearded figure could as easily be a Christian hermit or other loose affiliate of the Church as he could be a classical philosopher or any other manner of person. It is not primarily his physical appearance that is of significance here, but his gesture and the interaction with the bishop, for these elements would be retained by Raphael and given prominence elsewhere in the composition, even though this figure, himself, would disappear in subsequent studies and fail to show in the completed fresco. In the London *modello*, he is the figure who points directly upward, with one finger raised to heaven, and thus signals to the bishop, his companion, a knowledge of the Divine, above. Whether Christian or classical, he is here a bridge from the Chantilly study, which placed a similar figure, or a similar gesture, further in the background, but still on the same side of the composition and in the same position relative to the nearest Church Father (figure 88), and the completed fresco, in which the figure and gesture appear on the opposite side of the composition and actually involve one of the Fathers, who takes the pose and action of the surprised friar in the London *modello*. In the London *modello*, this figure may or may not be a philosopher. He is, however, a precursor to the Plato who appears in the final, painted version of the *Disputa* and the sign of Raphael's continuing interest in and development of a motif that would, in that final version of the scene, be of the utmost iconographic importance.

The London *modello* would seem to represent a middle or intermediate stage in the development of the iconography of the *Disputa*. The *modello* does appear to include a philosopher, perhaps more than one, among the theologians of the lower register and to present, in some manner, the theme of philosophy as a method of knowing or approaching the Christian God. If this theme is present in the London *modello*, it is not as fully defined as it would become in later drawings or in the final fresco. The London *modello* may include philosophers in the population of the lower register, but does not place them in any direct relationship with the Fathers of the Church, with their writings or doctrines, or with any theological pursuit or method associated with one or more of the Fathers in particular. Furthermore, if the figure in the background, beside the bishop and behind Pope Gregory, is, in fact, a precursor to Plato, his presence together with a proto-Aristotle on the same side of the *Disputa*, to the left of the altar, would suggest that Raphael had not yet developed the idea of dividing that scene *and the other frescoes of the room* according to a program in which one side of the Stanza della Segnatura would present figures and disciplines related to moral philosophy and the other would present a justification for philosophy and dialectic as a means toward comprehending the Divine.

A final stage in the development of the iconography of the *Disputa* is represented by a series of drawings in which Raphael established the poses and positions of his philosophers, Aristotle and Plato, and the particulars of their interactions with the Christian figures of the *Disputa*, which is to say their very roles in the action and subject of the *Disputa* and in the greater iconographic program of the Stanza della Segnatura. Raphael reworked the left side of the *Disputa*, rearranging the figures present in the London *modello* such that the striding philosopher and the other, possible philosopher



were replaced by or conflated into a single figure standing at the head of the group of novices and directing their attention toward Gregory's books. Raphael crafted this figure in a series of drawing preserved in the collection of the Ashmolean museum, progressing from a quick figure sketch to more detailed studies of his drapery, (figures 89 and 90) and finally inserted him into the left foreground of the *Disputa* in a *modello* now in the Vienna Albertina.<sup>58</sup> (Figure 91) Also in this stage of iconographic development, Raphael transferred the upward pointing finger of the pseudo-philosopher in the London *modello* and the friar's gesture of surprise to the right side of the *Disputa*, where they were given ultimately to Plato and to Ambrose. Raphael experimented with these figures in a loose sketch also in the Vienna Albertina, trying both a bishop's miter and a full head of hair on the head of his pointing figure and rendering Ambrose as a passive and expressionless participant in the exchange.<sup>59</sup> (Figure 92) Raphael redrew Ambrose in greater detail and in a more expressive pose on another sheet.<sup>60</sup> (Figure 93) If he studied the pointing figure any further before the execution of the fresco, those studies do not survive.

### Conclusions

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<sup>58</sup> The studies are Oxford, Ashmolean 545 recto and verso and Oxford, Ashmolean 543, reproduced in Paul Joannides, *The Drawings of Raphael: with a complete catalogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 187, cat. nos. 218r, 218v, and 219, respectively. The *modello* is Vienna, Albertina Bc. V, 224, reproduced in Joannides, *Drawings of Raphael*, 188, cat. no. 222.

<sup>59</sup> Vienna, Albertina Bd. IV, 205, reproduced in Joannides, *Drawings of Raphael*, 184, cat. no. 207r.

<sup>60</sup> Munich, Graphische Sammlung 2458, Joannides, *Drawings of Raphael*, 184, cat. no. 208r.

It is possible that the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura were originally conceived as the decoration of a library space and that the subjects chosen for the decorative program, in its earliest stage of development, corresponded to the four faculties or divisions of knowledge that were particularly relevant or of interest to the patron, Pope Julius II, and deemed suitable for representation in his personal library.<sup>61</sup> The earliest surviving drawings from Raphael's involvement in the project do fit such a program, and the room has plausibly been identified as having served such a function.<sup>62</sup> Whether acting on his own authority, openly or under the guise of making compositional changes to the scenes he would paint, or on the advice of a patron or iconographic advisor, Raphael so transformed the scenes through changes made to the relative position of figures, to poses, and to iconographic attributes, that the final program was not divisive, not characterized by opposing populations or bounded faculties, not a cycle simply of Arts or Humanities or of the most notable exemplars of any of these, personified. Over the course of production, Raphael introduced new themes, new subjects, and ultimately executed a fresco cycle that was entirely unique, even revolutionary in subject matter—a statement on the concord of philosophy and theology and a depiction of the parallel paths of moral philosophy and dialectic as means toward approaching and knowing the Christian Godhead.

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<sup>61</sup> One may note, as Wickhoff, "Bibliothek Julius' II," 53, that university libraries were more commonly organized into the categories of theology, philosophy, law, *and medicine*. Wickhoff gave little relevance to the difference between this ideal or prototypical organization and the faculties represented in the Stanza della Segnatura, perhaps because this distinction would have complicated his argument that the frescoes were organized according to the divisions and faculties represented in a library catalog.

<sup>62</sup> Shearman, "The Vatican Stanze, Functions and Decoration."

In recent years, scholars have sought the papal courtier or learned advisor responsible for the intricate and particular program of the Stanza della Segnatura.<sup>63</sup> The evidence presented in Raphael's preparatory drawings suggests that the iconographic program developed from its first inception through a series of small but significant changes in a gradual process of transformation. The general subjects represented in the frescoes—one wall, each, dedicated to theology, philosophy, poetry, and jurisprudence—must certainly have been prescribed by the patron or by his representative, but the particulars of representation, the precise identity of individual figures and their respective positions in each scene and within the greater scope of the iconographic program were apparently not prescribed. Only two possible scenarios explain the process by which these details and, indeed, the final iconographic program of the Stanza della Segnatura were established—either Raphael was, himself, responsible for both the artistic and the iconographic changes made to the Stanza della Segnatura program or a very active advisor worked with the artist at virtually every stage of development, suggesting subtle changes to figure poses, positions, and attributes, not only in response to presented *modelli*, but even between each individual figure study, compositional study, *garzone* sketch, *modello*, cartoon, and during the actual execution of the fresco. Francis Ames-Lewis refrained from passing judgment on whether Raphael or his patron was responsible in each other instance in which significant iconographic changes were made during the

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<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Ingrid Rowland's proposal that Tommaso Inghirami was Raphael's advisor. Rowland, "The Intellectual Background," 158-59.

production of a major work.<sup>64</sup> Given a pattern of such occurrences, however, with the only constant being the involvement of the particular artist, it would seem that Raphael, himself, may have been active in developing, even transforming the iconography of his major works and may have been responsible for the particular iconography introduced into the program of the Stanza della Segnatura over the course of its preparatory production.

If Raphael was, himself, responsible for introducing new themes into the iconographic program of the Stanza della Segnatura frescoes, he did not so transform the original program, here presumed, as to obscure or obliterate its essential content. On a basic level, the frescoes on the walls still retain their original subjects and represent the faculties of philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, and poetry. Indeed, one may even wonder whether a patron such as Julius II, active on so many other fronts, notorious for his intellectual restlessness, and, according to Vasari's account, preferring the sword to the book as his own attribute, would have been fully aware of the iconographic content of Raphael's frescoes, as painted, or whether he and his advisors would have continued to see in Raphael's work the project initially prescribed.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 2-3. On the development of the Baglioni *Entombment*, see Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 50-59, and on changes made to the typical composition and iconography of the *Madonna and Child* image, see Ames-Lewis, *Draftsman Raphael*, 59-65.

<sup>65</sup> On Julius' restlessness during lectures or sermons, even by his own advisors, see John O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979), 27. Vasari described an encounter between Michelangelo and Julius in which the Pope rejected the idea of a book as an attribute in the monumental bronze portrait made for Bologna with the words, "Put a sword there, I know nothing about literature!" Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 438.

If the papal Person and Court were aware of the message and themes represented in Raphael's frescoes, this knowledge was not passed to future generations. A veritable army of impediments prevented later critics and scholars from recognizing the content of Raphael's program. Access to the room has not always been as readily attained as in the present day. The frescoes have been variously studied through reproductions—as prints, photographs, slides, and now digital images—by those at a distance from Rome or from the Papal Apartments, and, as a result, generations have come to know the individual scenes as individual scenes rather than as interwoven components of a seamless whole. Tourist guides, textbooks, and scholarly tomes have neatly divided the cycle into quadrants and described each portion in poetic ekphrasis and in manufactured sequence. The subjects and populations of the walls have been variously arranged in intellectual, theological, and artistic hierarchies, which fracture the program and promote the perception that each subject and population is the polar opposite of its “opposing” subject and population. Not least among these, a tradition of interpretation now stretches back over centuries, elucidating many aspects of the frescoes' content, context, and artistic significance, but also obscuring the origins of certain unfortunate elements that have, over centuries, become canonical.<sup>66</sup> Each of these factors has contributed in turn to a

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<sup>66</sup> Wickhoff, “Bibliothek Julius' II.” Wickhoff developed the idea first proposed by Anton Springer, that the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura were composed according to an ideal *Bücherkataloges*. While there are aspects of this theory which are relevant and have merit, Wickhoff's study also proposed a hierarchal ordering of faculties that does not accord with the actual representation in the Stanza della Segnatura and may have contributed to the continuing perception that theology and philosophy are, in that space, opposed conceptually. Note also that Crowe and Cavalcasselle interpreted the greater number of surviving drawings for the *Disputa* as evidence of Raphael's artistic immaturity when working on this fresco and his difficulty with its composition, an assumption which has persisted in subsequent scholarship and has perpetuated not only

persistent tendency to overlook the actual representation of Raphael's frescoes. This is not so much the result of any refusal or inability to see or to comprehend the iconography of the Stanza della Segnatura program, but reflects an ever increasing separation from the context and conditions in which the syncretic themes there represented would be easily recognized.

The frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura must be viewed in relation to the philosophical development of the Renaissance concepts of *theologicae poetae* and of *prisca theologia*, for these developing concepts shaped the representation of classical and Christian figures in that cycle of decoration. The frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura must be viewed directly, with an eye toward comprehending what is actually painted in the frescoes, themselves, whatever that may be and however that may relate to the scholarly tradition of interpretation. Furthermore, the frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura must be viewed in light of the iconographic changes and programmatic development made, likely by Raphael himself on his own authority, over the course of production, as each successive stage of drawn studies and *modelli* gave way successively to an ever more nuanced composition *and iconography*. So viewed, so studied, Raphael's work may properly be recognized as entirely unique, innovative, even radical in its departure from the traditions of library decoration and cycles of *uomini famosi*. Raphael's frescoes of the Stanza della Segnatura present a statement—his statement, Pico's statement, a distinctly High Renaissance statement—on the concord between classical

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their view that the *School of Athens* was a more perfect work than the *Disputa* but also the tendency to distinguish between the two frescoes in terms of iconography as well as perceived quality of execution. Crowe and Cavalcasselle, *Raphael: His Life and Works*, 29-31, 37, 54, 59.

philosophy and Christian theology, and a representation of the distinctly Renaissance view or perception that all of the cultures of Western history, classical included, fall within the greater scope of the Christian tradition.



Figure 63 – Raphael, *School of Athens*, fresco on the east wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome





Figure 64 – Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of the figure group in the left foreground, Fresco on the East wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome

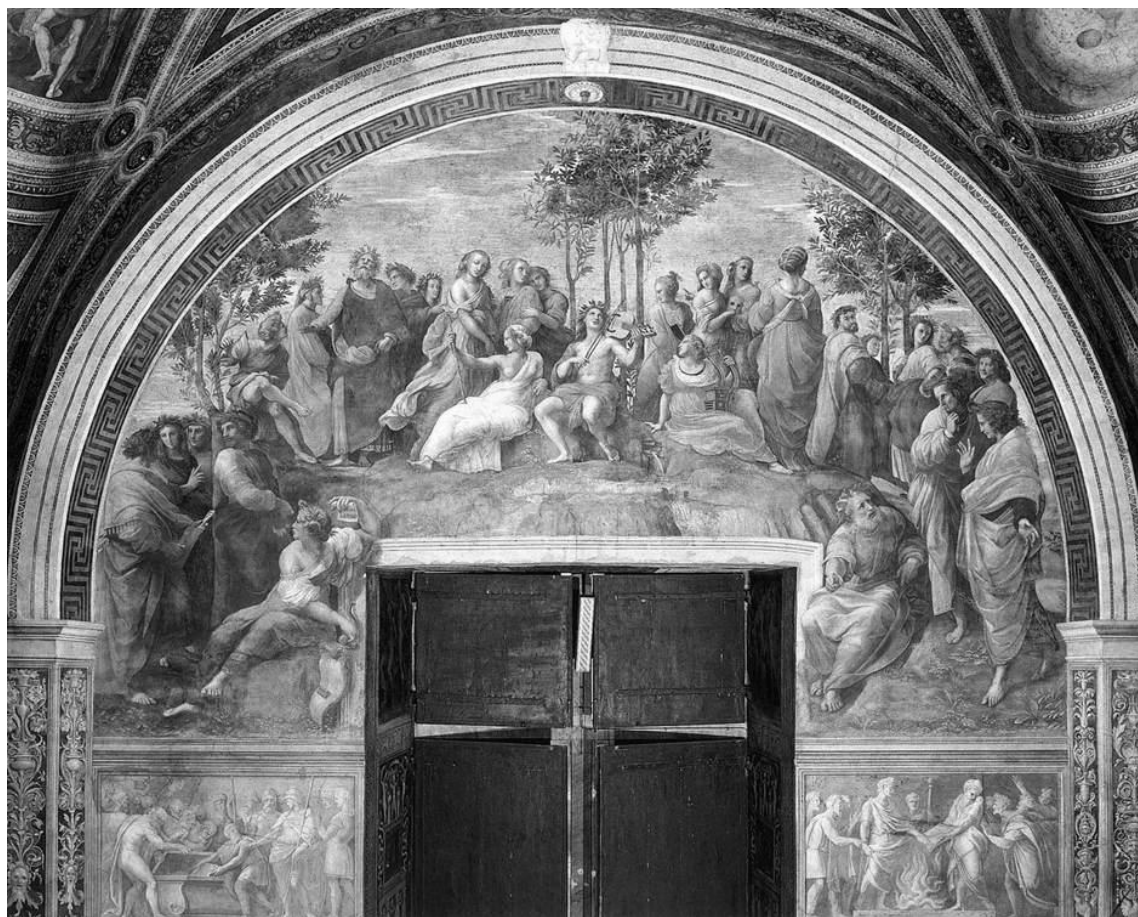


Figure 65 – Raphael, *Parnassus*, fresco on the north wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



Figure 66 – Raphael, *Parnassus*, detail of the figure group including Homer, Virgil, and Dante, fresco on the north wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome

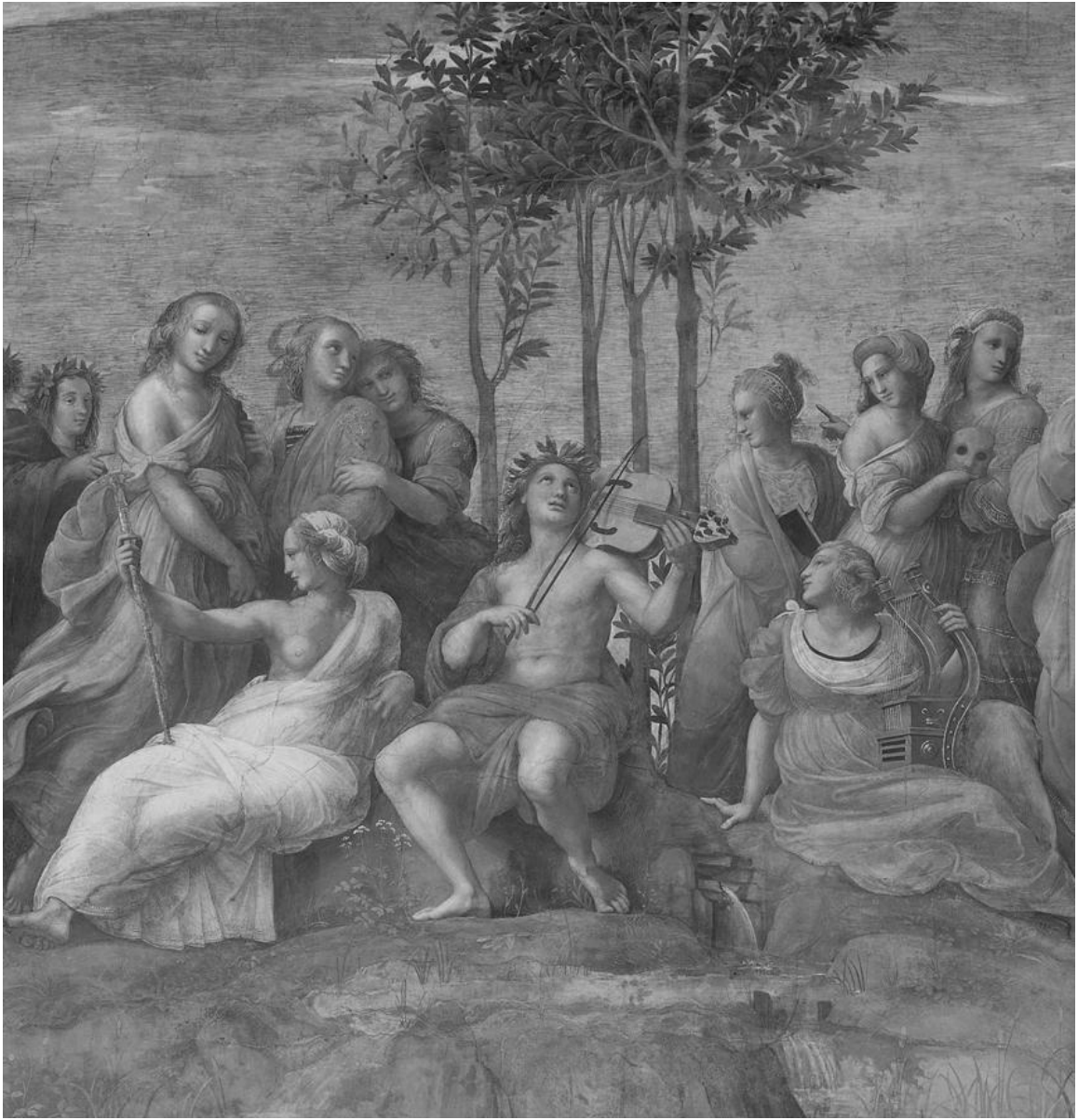


Figure 67 – Raphael, *Parnassus*, detail of the figure group including Orpheus and Muses, fresco on the north wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



Figure 68 – Raphael, *Apollo and Marsyas* from the vault of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome

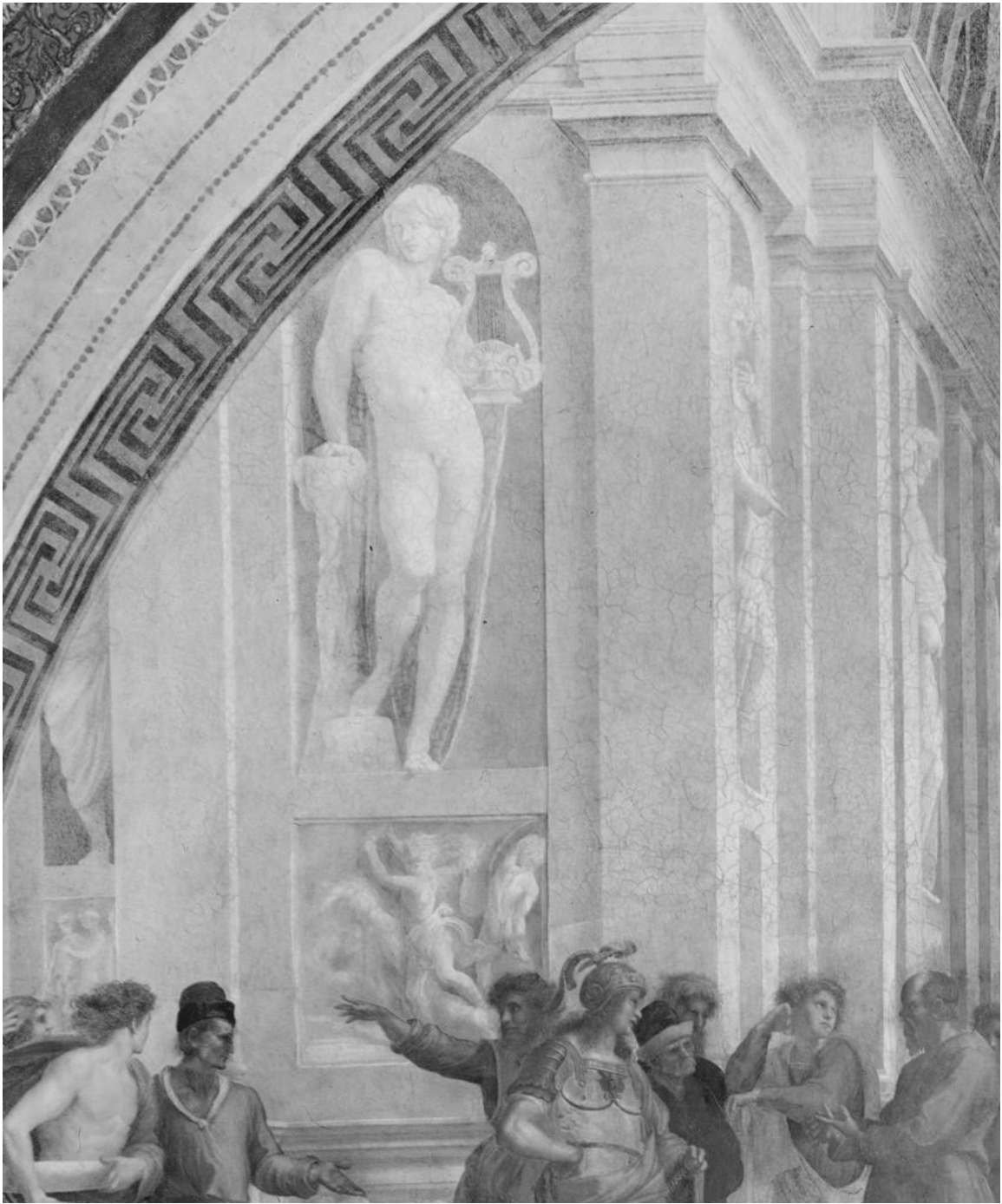


Figure 69 – Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of the statue of Apollo, fresco on the north wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



Figure 70 – Raphael, *Poetry*, from the vault of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



Figure 71 – Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of the figure of Aglaophemus, fresco on the north wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



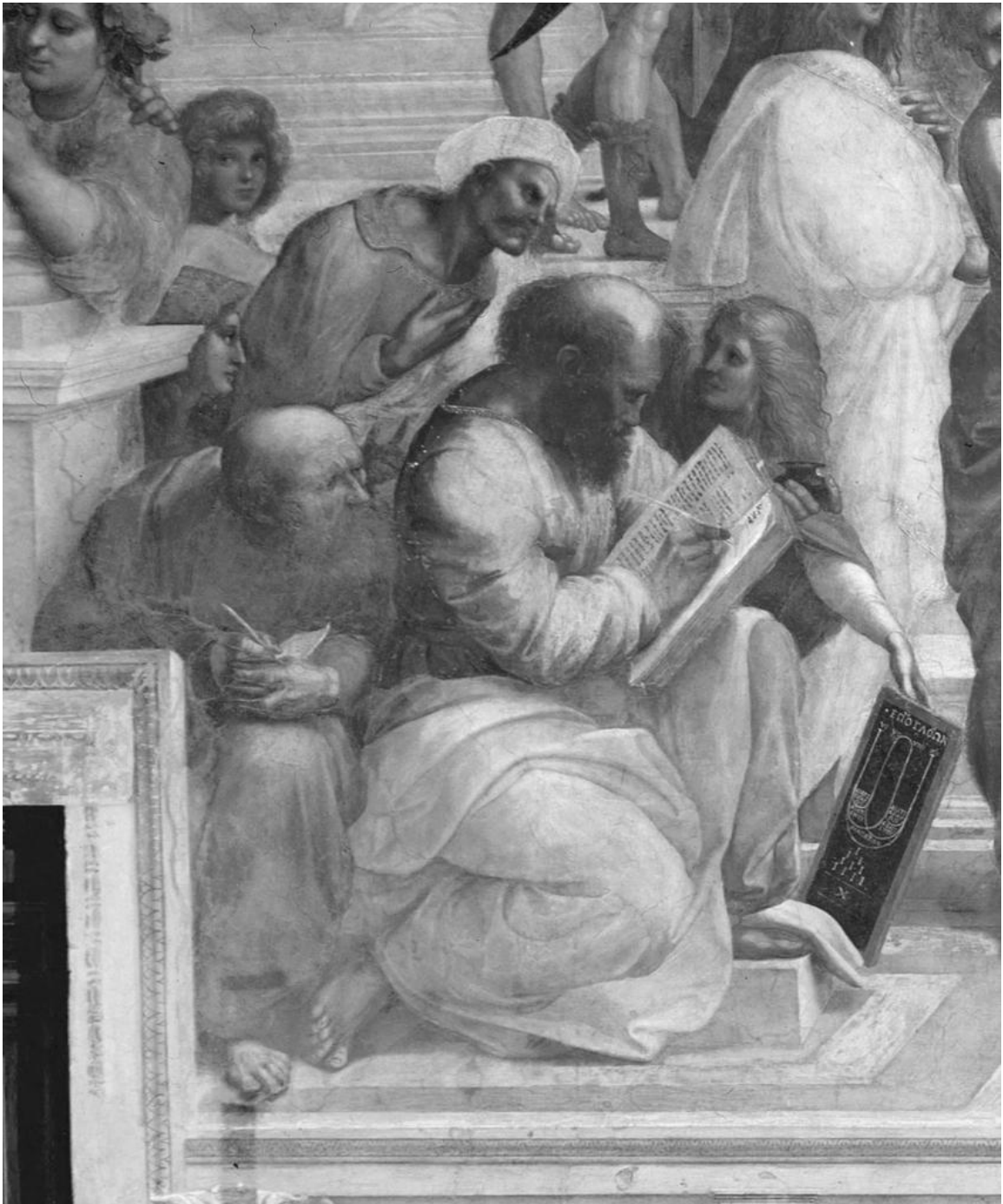


Figure 72 – Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of the figure of Pythagoras, fresco on the north wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome

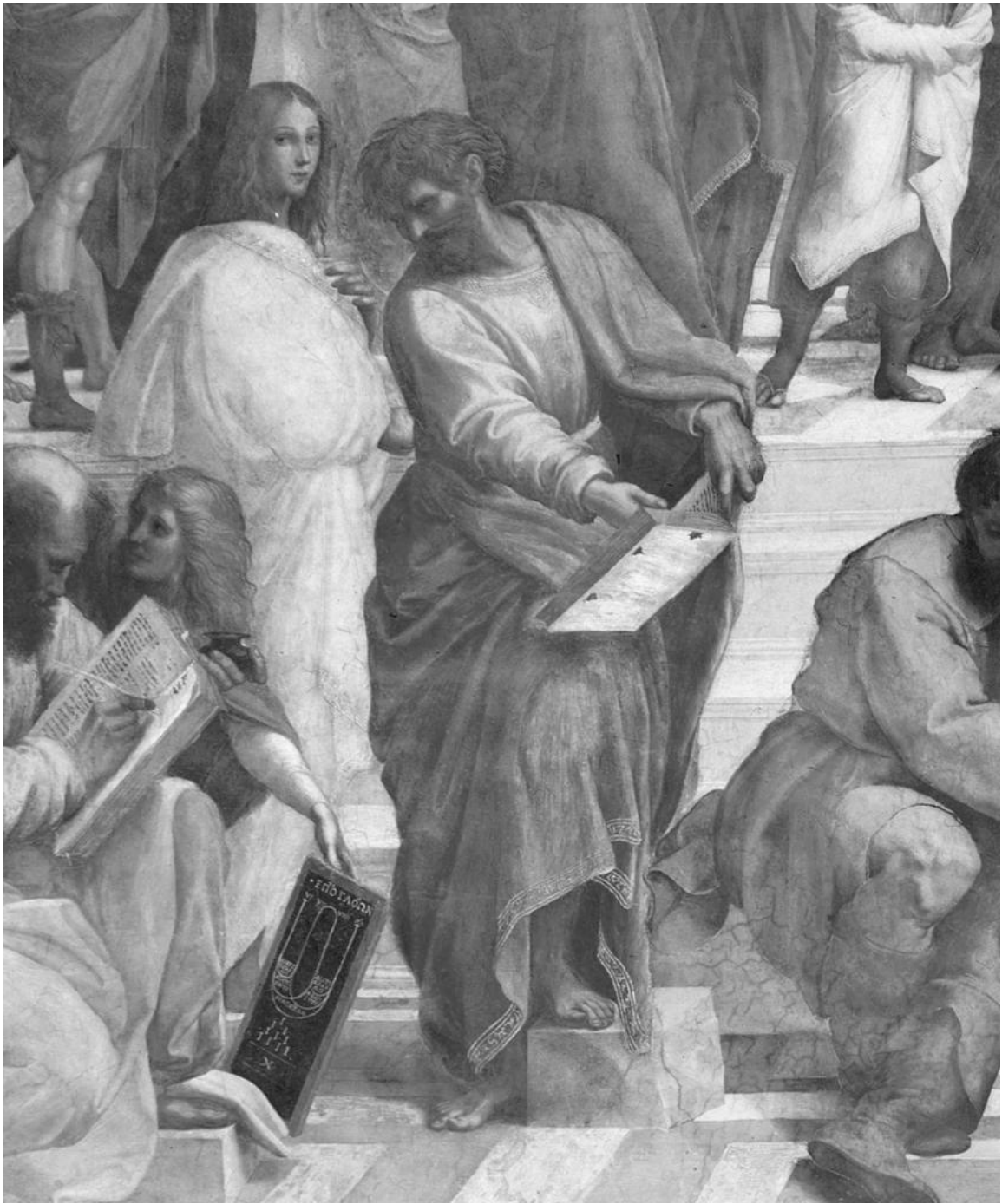


Figure 73 – Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of the figure of Philolaus, fresco on the north wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



Figure 74 – Raphael, *Disputa*, fresco on the south wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



Figure 75 – Raphael, *Disputa*, detail of the figures surrounding Dante, fresco on the south wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome

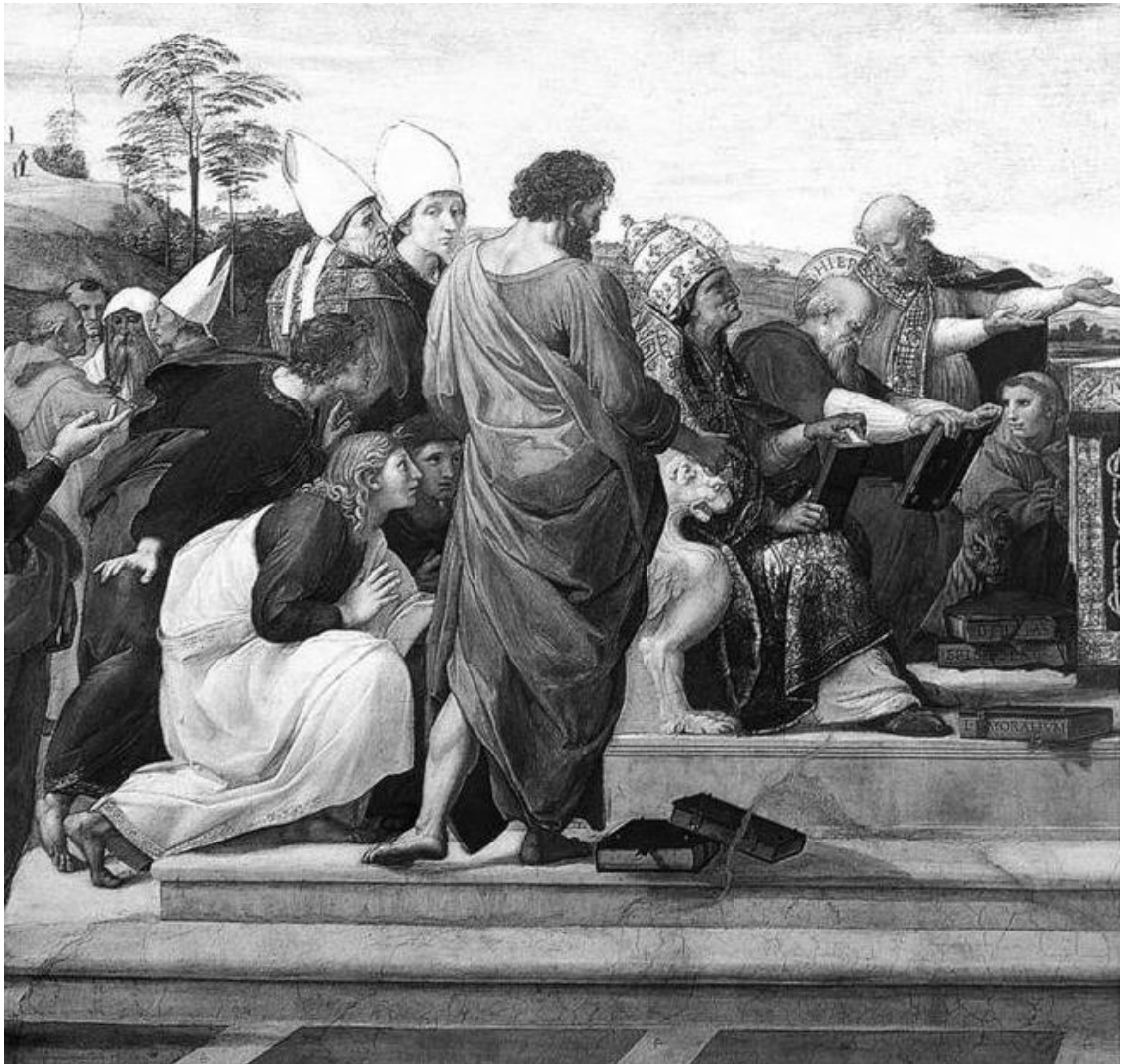


Figure 76 – Raphael, *Disputa*, Detail of the figure group surrounding Aristotle, fresco on the south wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



Figure 77 – Raphael, *Disputa*, detail of the figure group surrounding Plato, fresco on the south wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome

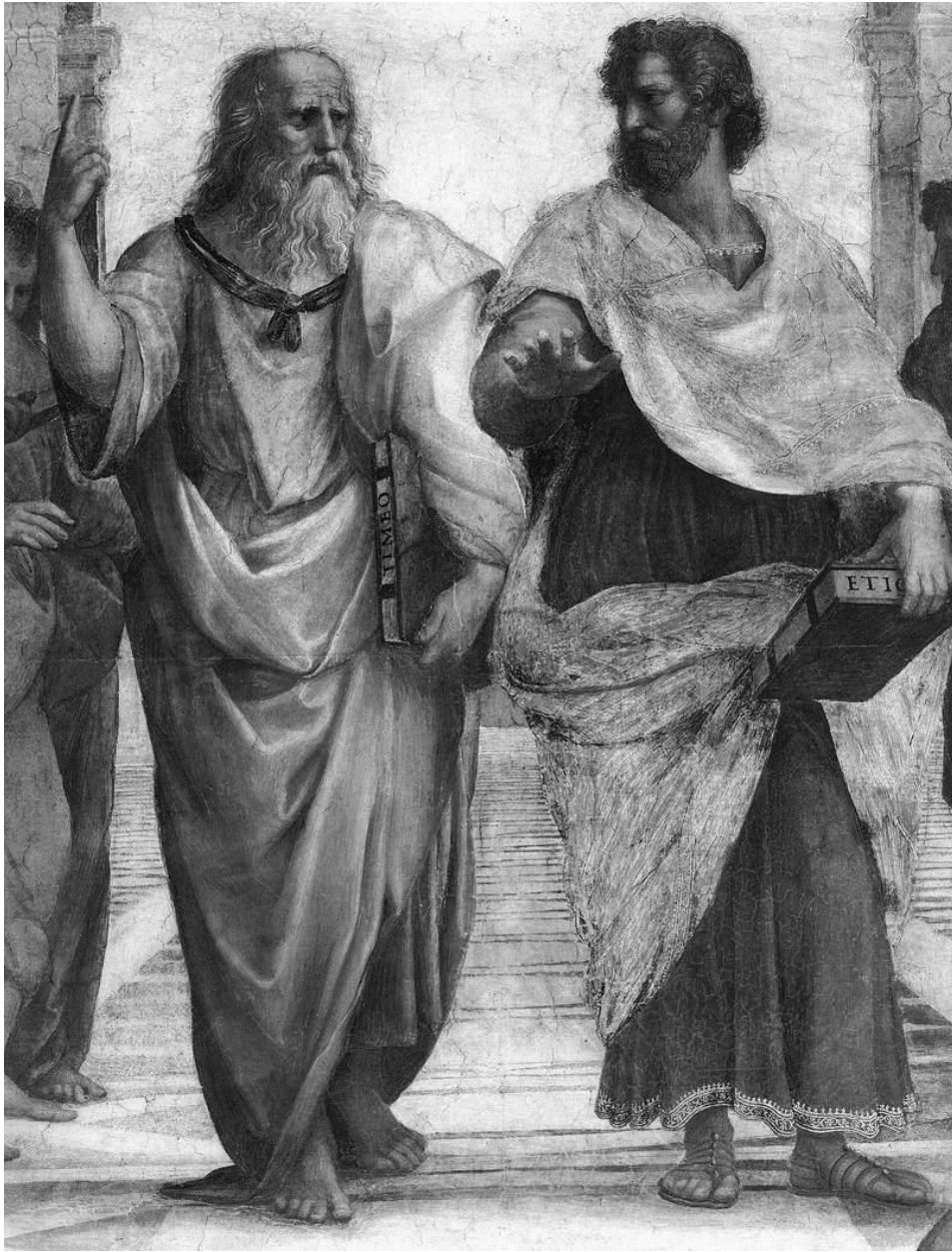


Figure 78 – Raphael, *School of Athens*, detail of the figures of Plato and Aristotle, fresco on the south wall of the Stanza della Segnatura, the Vatican, Rome



Figure 79 – Marcantonio Raimondi, *Parnassus*, engraving after Raphael





Figure 80 – Raphael, Study for *Parnassus*, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



Figure 81 – Raphael, Study for the central figure of *Parnassus*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille



Figure 82 – Raphael, *Modello* for the *Disputa*, Royal Library, Windsor



Figure 83 – Raphael, Study for the *Disputa*, upper register, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

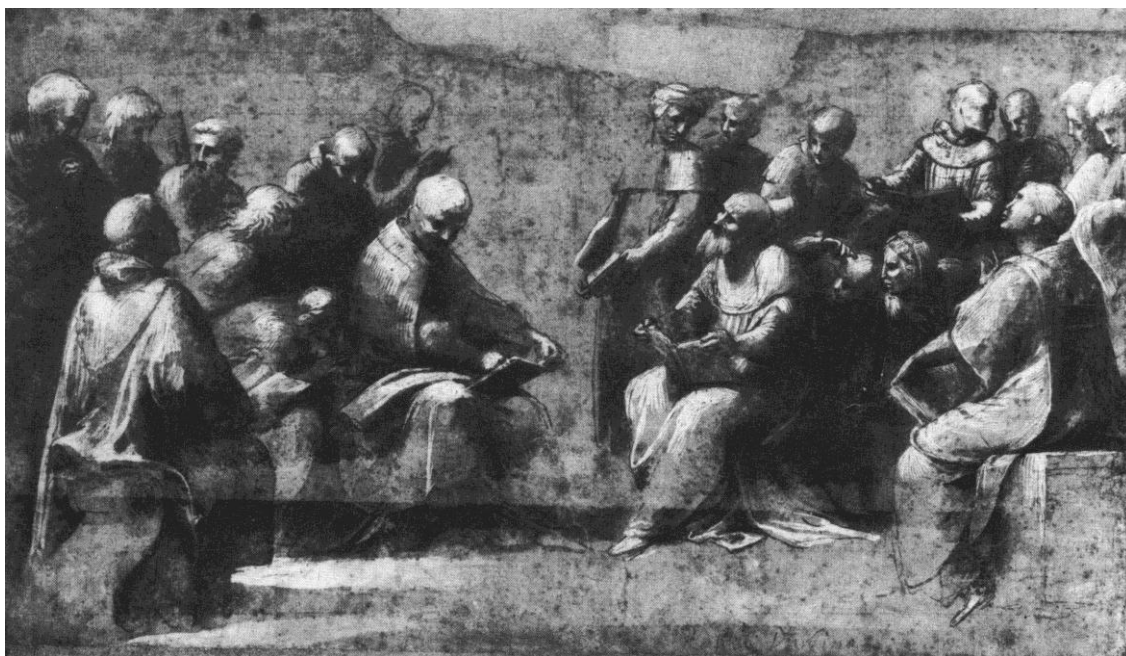


Figure 84 – Raphael, Study for the *Disputa*, lower register, Musée Condé, Chantilly



Figure 85 – Raphael, *Modello for the Disputa*, British Museum, London



Figure 86 – Raphael, *Modello* for the *Disputa*, detail of a figure group from the left side, British Museum, London



Figure 87 – Raphael, *Modello* for the *Disputa*, detail of the figures behind one of the seated Fathers, British Museum, London



Figure 88 – Raphael, Study for the *Disputa*, lower register, detail of a figure from the left side, Musée Condé, Chantilly



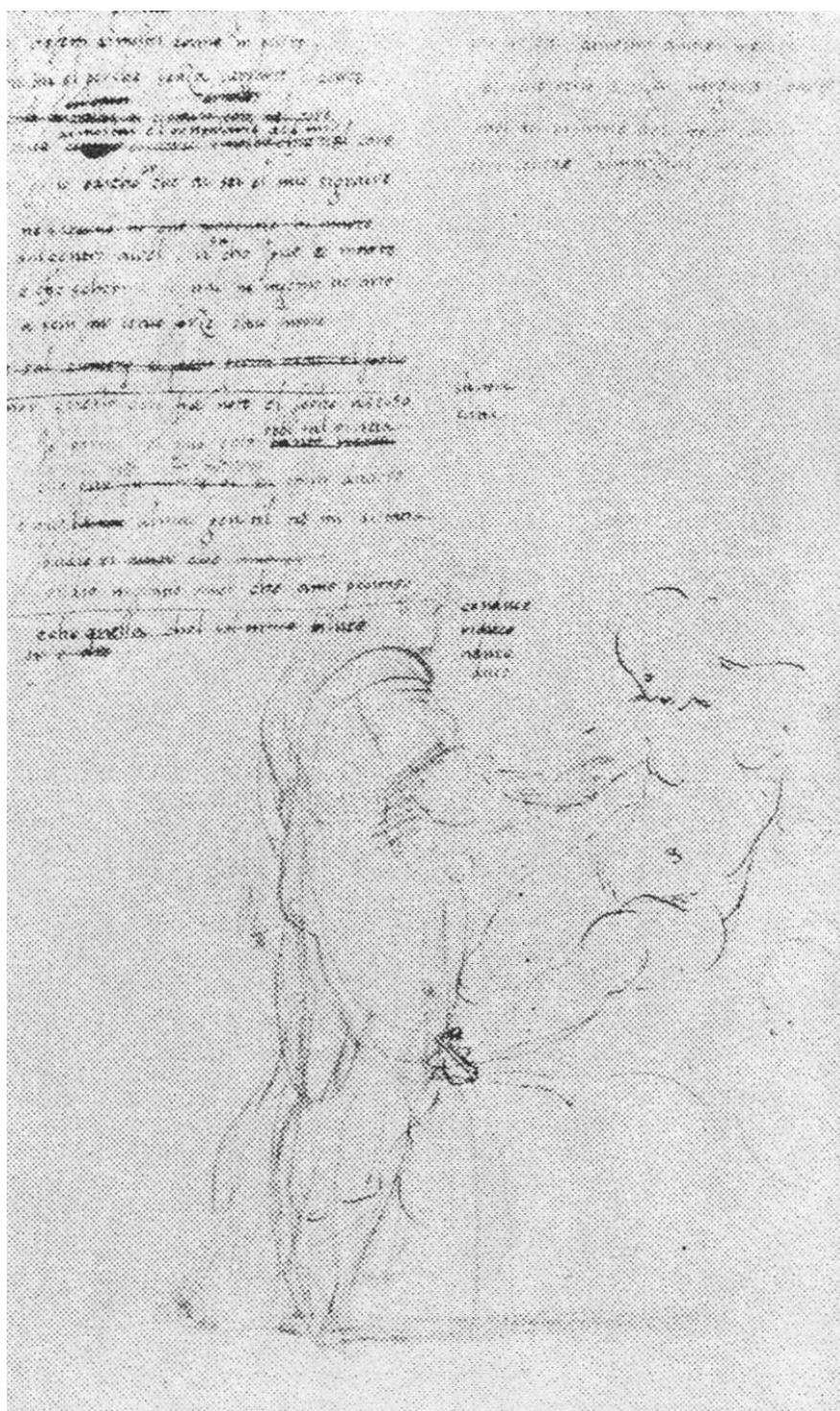


Figure 89 – Raphael, Study for the *Disputa*, two figures, including the standing philosopher, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



Figure 90 – Raphael, Study for the *Disputa*, drapery study for the standing philosopher, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



Figure 91 – Raphael, *Modello* for the *Disputa*, Albertina, Vienna



Figure 92 – Raphael, Study for the *Disputa*, Albertina, Vienna



Figure 93 – Raphael, Study for the *Disputa*, Graphische Sammlung, Munich

## CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing study is primarily interpretative in nature and offers new readings of certain works of art from the Italian Renaissance which have classical subjects and motifs either as their primary representation or included within a greater iconographic program. It is the central thesis of this dissertation that classical subjects and motifs were, in the literary theory and practice of the Italian Renaissance, interpreted allegorically for a perceived Christian content and were employed in the visual arts in order to gloss or reveal Christian doctrines through typological or anagogical allegory. Accordingly, the mythological scenes depicted in the socle of the Cappella Nova of Orvieto Cathedral are here identified as glosses on the developing Christian doctrine of Purgatory, Botticelli's *Primavera* is interpreted as a typological representation of the Virgin Mary's role in the transition from the period of the Old or Mosaic Law to the period of the New Dispensation, and the particular representation and placement of classical figures in the fresco cycle of the Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura are shown to contribute to a syncretic statement on the parallel paths of moral philosophy and dialectic as means toward approaching the Christian God.

This study offers more than simply a series of new interpretations, however, but also an interpretative method and criteria for its application. I do not propose that every representation of classical subjects or motifs in the art of the Italian Renaissance is intended as a gloss on Christian doctrines or relates allegorically to the mysteries of the Christian faith, but that this is one of a number of possible modes of representation. Thus, this dissertation does not seek to replace the more established modes of interpretation

with a new system in which every work must be interpreted according to an imposed Christian viewpoint. Rather, this study shows that in specific instances, particularly those in which classical and Christian elements are juxtaposed within a greater program of decoration or those particular examples in which an ambiguity of representation suggests that an allegorical interpretation is warranted, a typological, anagogical, or syncretic interpretation may be appropriate to the work of art.

This method or mode of interpretation does apply to the works described in this dissertation and does lead to plausible explanations of elements or aspects of works that are otherwise problematic. Other, similar works may yet prove to be typological, anagogical, or otherwise syncretic in theme or subject. Certain *tondi* painted by Signorelli and Michelangelo, for example, juxtapose the Madonna and Child with figures that are either overtly or ambiguously classical, and could, conceivably, gloss the nature or quality of the Virgin or of the Christ Child through a perceived quality or characteristic shared by or exemplified in the classical element included in the representation.<sup>1</sup> (Figures 94, 95, and 96) If these *tondi* are not discussed in the present study, this is only because I am not yet satisfied with scholarly attempts to explicate or interpret the classical elements, including my own. Further study may reveal a meaning or significance for

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<sup>1</sup> These are two *tondi* painted by Signorelli, now in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, and the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, and Michelangelo's celebrated *Doni Tondo*, also in the Uffizi. On Signorelli's Uffizi tondo, see Tom Henry and Laurence Kanter, *Luca Signorelli: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), 112, 173-74, with a critical bibliography. For the Munich tondo, Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 194. The *Doni Tondo* is variously described in most major works on Michelangelo and in more focused articles. On the *Spinario* and its appearance in Renaissance art, including all three *tondi*, Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 148-58.

these works that is in keeping with the subject of this dissertation. It is my greatest hope that further study will also bring to light other works like these and that, with each new example, the scope of this study may expand and its significance increase.

It is possible, as well, that other works of art from the Italian Renaissance which depict classical figures or mythological subjects may prove to be typological or anagogical in the particulars of their representation and in intended message. Works like Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur* (figure 97) and Signorelli's *Court of Pan* (figure 98) continue to confound scholars and defy explanation.<sup>2</sup> Given that certain Renaissance artists, in particular instances, sought to gloss or convey the mysteries of the Christian faith through the representation of classical figures and themes, and that these very artists did precisely this in other works—Botticelli in the *Primavera* and Luca Signorelli in the cycle of mythological scenes that decorate the socle of Orvieto Cathedral—there is at least the possibility that they did the same in these works, as well. It has not been, and will not be the aim of this study to “elucidate” every mythological work of art from the Italian Renaissance, nor every work that is or may be typological, anagogical, or syncretic in subject or theme, but to explore the interpretative systems of the Renaissance and to pursue the significance of certain primary exemplars. The *Pallas* and *Pan* will not, here, be elucidated. May it suffice to say that in further studies, either by myself or by others who follow, the scholar of Renaissance art must, at the very least, consider the possibility

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<sup>2</sup> On Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur*, see Ronald Lightbown, Ronald, *Sandro Botticelli*, vol. 1, *Life and Work* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 82-85; Lightbown, Ronald, *Sandro Botticelli*, vol. 2, *Complete Catalog* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 57-60. On Signorelli's *Court of Pan*, see Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 172-73, with a critical bibliography.



that works such as these were composed with typological, anagogical, or syncretic themes in mind, though surely the prudent scholar will consider also those various other possibilities which remain—that the work could have been intended to serve a more literal or decorative purpose, or that some manner of personal, civic, moral, or philosophical allegory was coded in the figures and forms from Antiquity.

This dissertation has considered, also, themes of continuity and change, above all in the medieval and Renaissance responses to classical Antiquity. It is a thesis of this dissertation that the expansion of the interpretative modes of Biblical exegesis to extra-Scriptural texts and a developing belief in the theological authority of certain classical poets and philosophers represent a fundamental shift in the post-Antique response to classical culture and are phenomena first manifest in the Italian Renaissance. Together with other contributing factors, these phenomena are at least partially responsible for the changes that characterize the use and representation of classical subjects and motifs in Renaissance art, as opposed to the use and representation of classical subjects and motifs in the art of the Middle Ages. Classical figures and subjects appear more frequently in Renaissance art than in medieval art. Classical subjects are represented in the art of the Italian Renaissance on a scale and in media primarily reserved for Christian subjects in the art of the Middle Ages. Further, Classical subjects are, in the Italian Renaissance, represented in their “true” forms—i.e. as known from classical Antiquity—and, to all appearances, in an aesthetic that owes more to Antique forms, literary as well as visual, than to medieval or Christian traditions.<sup>3</sup> If these are the oft repeated hallmarks of Italian

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<sup>3</sup> Aby Warburg, “Sandro Botticelli’s Birth of Venus and Spring,” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 112-142; Rensselaer Lee, *Ut pictura poesis; the humanistic theory of painting* (New York: W. W. Norton,

Renaissance art, to these may be added one other distinction, which may be more fundamental than these others and perhaps even their essential cause. That distinction, which is the very essence of this dissertation, is this: that artists and patrons of the Italian Renaissance, believing in a universal, Christian history which, in their perception, encompassed and included classical culture as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition, used classical figures and forms, subjects and motifs in art in order to gloss and even to reveal the most profound mysteries of the Christian faith.



Figure 94 – Luca Signorelli, *Madonna and Child*, Alte Pinakothek, Munich



Figure 95 – Luca Signorelli, *Madonna and Child*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



Figure 96 – Michelangelo, *Doni Tondo*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



Figure 97 – Botticelli, *Pallas and the Centaur*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

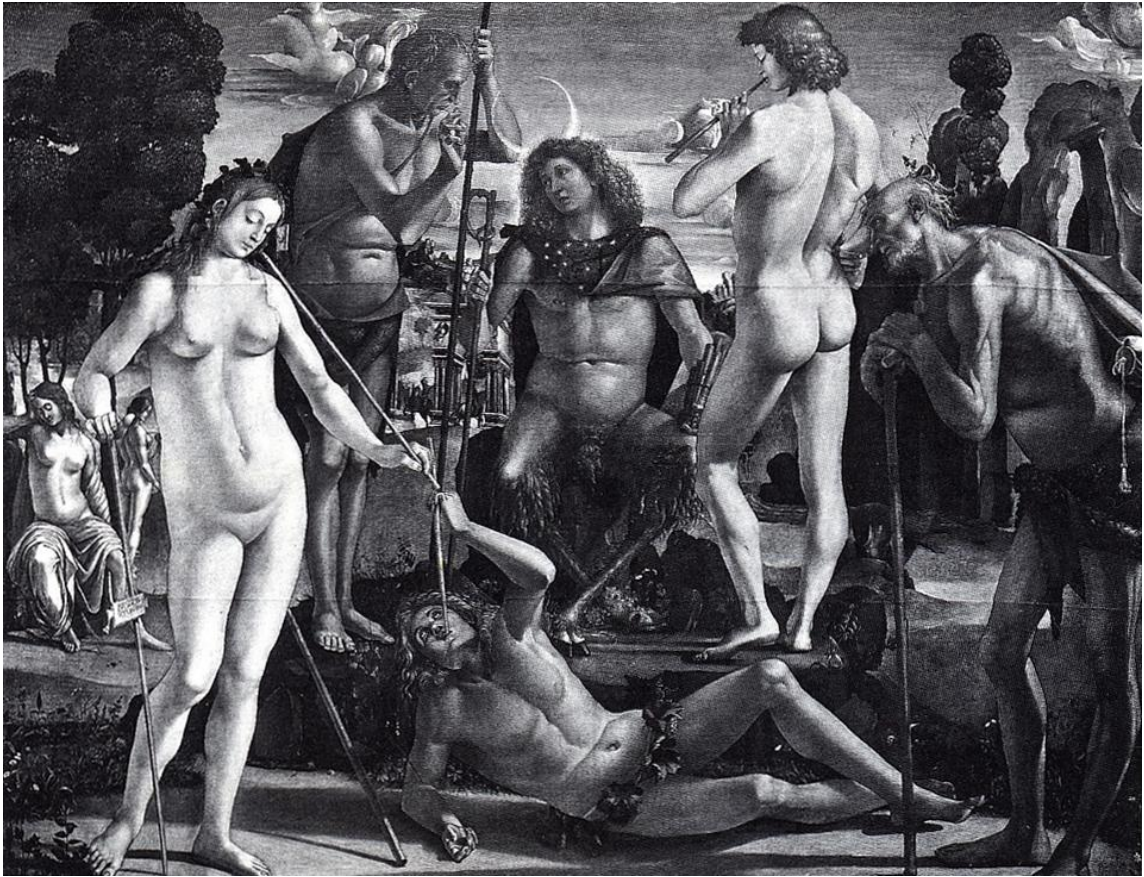


Figure 98 – Luca Signorelli, *Court of Pan*, formerly Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin (Destroyed 1945)

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