

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Monika Schmitter

1995

Botticelli's Images of Simonetta Vespucci: Between Portrait and Ideal

Monika Schmitter, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/monika_schmitter/6/

**Botticelli's Images of Simonetta Vespucci:
Between Portrait and Ideal**

Monika A. Schmitter

A series of five mysterious, portraitlike images produced by Sandro Botticelli's workshop in the late fifteenth century shows the same female sitter, bust length, in profile, with an extremely ornate hairstyle. These images are difficult to classify. On the one hand, they follow the conventions of portraiture—they show a single, bust-length figure in profile against a plain, colored background or an architectural setting; on the other hand, because the woman is portrayed with decorated, loose, overabundant, waving hair and somewhat classical dress, she appears to be a more generalized type—a nymph or goddess rather than a mortal woman. Besides being visually intriguing in their own right, these images have played a pivotal, although not always fully acknowledged, role in the historiography of Botticelli, of his famous painting *Primavera* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), and, by extension, of Florentine culture and society under the rule of Lorenzo de' Medici. The various images have often been identified as portraits of Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci, a Genoese woman married to a Florentine, who was the object of Giuliano de' Medici's unrequited love. Simonetta was Giuliano's "Petrarchan mistress"—a beautiful, chaste, and unattainable upper-class woman whom he adored from afar in the spirit of Petrarch's love for Laura.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many paintings by Botticelli were believed to contain likenesses of Simonetta. She was thought to be the model for Venus in *Mars and Venus* (National Gallery, London) and the *Birth of Venus* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), for Venus or Flora in the *Primavera*, for *Judith*, and for the *Madonna del Magnificat* (all Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), to name only a few examples. While many of these identifications are not now accepted, Simonetta continues to play an important role in the interpretation of Botticelli's images. Dempsey has recently reintroduced the theory that Flora in the *Primavera* represents Simonetta.¹ For the most part, however, contemporary scholars are wary of the "Simonetta theory." As a result, they have severed the connection between Simonetta and the portraitlike images from Botticelli's workshop, preferring to call these images "ideal heads"—creations of a generic conception of female beauty.²

What, however, is meant by an "ideal"? Where does this ideal come from and what is its purpose? Can we be sure that these portraitlike images are not meant to refer to a particular woman? I will show that the effect of the images hinges on how they operate between the categories of portrait and ideal. They transform an actual woman, quite possibly Simonetta, into an ideal based on Petrarchan poetry. I will examine the way in which the artist invokes and combines two types of representation of women—portraits and depictions of nymphs or goddesses. I will argue that evidence that the images portray Simonetta is not as negligible as some art historians have assumed. Finally, I will compare the images to poems written about Simonetta after her early death. The correspondences between poems and images not only support the idea that the paintings refer to Simonetta but, more important, they reveal how dead young noblewomen could be idealized, even eroticized, in both poetry and painting. The late fifteenth-century "portraits" from Botticelli's workshop are early examples of the problematic category of Renaissance paintings identified by Cropper as "portraits of unknown beautiful women."³ In many sixteenth-century images, as in the Simonetta pictures,⁴ it is difficult to determine whether an actual woman, an ideal, a courtesan, or a goddess is represented. As Cropper says, "a portrait of a beautiful woman is not...simply a portrait with a female rather than a male subject."⁵ However, the new genre is not a vision of a generic female ideal, either. Indeed, the play between "real" and "imaginary" woman is central to the effect both of the Simonetta and of the later, sixteenth-century images. Although the Simonetta paintings can be seen as precursors of the many Venetian sensuous half-length images, of Raphael's *Fornarina* (Galleria Nazionale, Rome), and of the Leonardo school's *Mona Vanna* images, they have a different erotic appeal. Unlike the more sensual and direct address of the sixteenth-century

images, in this fifteenth-century Florentine variant the attraction lies in the aloofness and unattainability of the lady."

The Images: Portrait/Ideal

Of the five images in the Simonetta series by Botticelli's workshop, three will be examined in detail here: the paintings in the Stadelches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt; the Gemaldegalerie, Berlin; and the National Gallery, London. On the reverse of the last is an allegorical figure of an angel with an armillary sphere in one hand and a clump of moss(?) in the other. Of the two other images in the series, the first, a painting in the collection of the Marubeni Corporation, Tokyo,⁷ is quite similar to the London painting, and the second, a drawing in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford,⁸ must be either a study for or, more likely, a copy after the Frankfurt version. The considerable number of these surviving images suggests that they had a certain popularity in their time.

Other portraitlike images have also been associated with Simonetta, but they differ considerably from the ones described above. One painting, in the Kisters collection, Kreuzlingen (formerly Cook collection, Richmond), also attributed to Botticelli's workshop, represents a woman with a loose and ornate hairstyle pressing milk from her exposed breast.¹¹ Another painting, this one by Piero di Cosimo, shows a woman in profile with an ornate hairstyle, bare breasts, and a snake around her neck. The inscription on the ledge beneath her identifies her as "Simonetta Ianvensis Vespucci." While I focus here on the Botticelli images in Frankfurt, Berlin, and London, dealing only peripherally with that by Piero di Cosimo, it is important to remember that these images are part of a larger group of late fifteenth-century Florentine images of women that lie somewhere between portrait and ideal.¹

In his latest monograph on Botticelli, Lightbown considers the Frankfurt, Berlin, and London paintings workshop pieces." He dates them from the 1480s, arguing that Botticelli's rising popularity at that time caused the output of his workshop to increase. While Lightbown's dating is plausible, it is not definitive. Even if we accept the date, it does not rule out the possibility that the images portray Simonetta, who died in 1476. The paintings could be posthumous inventions, perhaps based on an earlier portrait likeness.¹²

The paintings look like portraits but, upon closer examination, differ from the standards of female portraiture in a variety of ways. The Frankfurt painting (fig. 1) is the least portraitlike of the three. While the other two paintings have the dimensions of typical Quattrocento portraits (Berlin, 47.5 x 35 cm; London, 59 x 40 cm), the Frankfurt



1. Botticelli workshop, *Portrait of a Woman (Simonetta Vespucci?)*, early-mid-1480s. Stadelches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt (photo: Ursula Edelmann)

picture is oversize (82 x 54 cm). Not only is the panel larger, but the figure more fully fills the composition. The woman turns her body toward the viewer, filling horizontal as well as vertical space. The flat color background, more complex hairstyle, and antique cameo around the woman's neck also differentiate this image from the Berlin and London pictures. Bode, who called the work "colossal," suggested that it might have been made for a decorative purpose rather than as a traditional portrait.¹³

The Berlin and London paintings (figs. 2,3) are clearly meant to look like portraits: the woman's body is nearly in profile and she is neatly placed within an architectural setting. Such a setting is indeed a hallmark of Botticelli's portraiture style.¹⁴ Whether an actual person or an ideal is presented, the artist undoubtedly wanted to evoke the idea of portraiture: that is, to convey the impression of a specific woman sitting for her portrait.

Although the use of the profile evokes the idea of portraiture, by the 1480s the profile format, which had been common in depictions of women between about 1440 and 1470, had fallen out of fashion. More typical late Quattrocento female—and male—portraits show the sitter three-quarter length, turned toward the viewer, as in Botticelli's *Portrait of a Lady (Smeralda Brandini?)* (fig. 4).¹⁵ Even as profile portraits the Frankfurt, Berlin, and London images are atypical: most Quattrocento female portraits face left, but the Frankfurt and London pieces face right. The use of the profile, bust-length format and, in two instances, the orientation mark the Simonetta images as, at least, unusual portraits.¹⁶

By far the most striking aspect of the images, by comparison with standard portraits, is the depiction of the hair. Although fairly elaborate hairstyles coiffed with ribbons and pearls are not uncommon in female portraits—for example, in Antonio Pollaiuolo's *Portrait of a Woman* (Museo Poldi-Pezzoli, Milan) or Piero della Francesca's *Portrait of Battista Sforza* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)—the overabundance of hair and hair hanging loose in the Simonetta images is at variance with standard portraits. Since social convention did not allow married women to wear their hair loose, it would have been inappropriate for them to have been depicted that way in a standard portrait.¹⁷

In all three images the woman is shown with an elaborate combination of braided hair, loose hair, and hair decorated with pearls and ribbons. In the Frankfurt picture, the braids are brought together to meet between the woman's breasts. In both the Frankfurt and Berlin pictures, one section of hair waves out behind the woman's head. The hairstyle in the London painting is somewhat less ornate, but a long braid (barely visible) falls down the woman's back and loose, wavy tresses fall around her neck. These complex, partly loose, partly ornamented hairstyles have more in common with Botticelli's depictions of imaginary women, especially those in his mythological scenes, than they do with his portraits.

A number of women in Botticelli's imaginary scenes—*Fortitude* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), *Judith*, *Venus in Mars* and *Venus*, and one of the Graces in *Primavera*—have braids that meet between their breasts, as in the Frankfurt painting. Women with such hairstyles belong to an imaginary realm removed from everyday social conventions. Their presence is also more erotically charged. Loose hair was considered improper because it was sexually alluring.¹⁸ The woman in the portraitlike images is made sexually provocative because the arrangement of her hair transgresses the norms of the portrait format.¹⁹



2. Botticelli workshop, *Portrait of a Woman (Simonetta Vespucci?)*, mid-1480s. Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemaldegalerie, Berlin

The jewelry in the Frankfurt picture and the costume in the London picture also differentiate the woman from sitters in portraits. The woman in the Frankfurt painting wears an antique cameo that is known to have belonged to the Medici.²⁰ Usually women in portraits wear more conventional jewelry, as in the London painting.²¹ The inclusion of the gem in the Frankfurt painting suggests that the artist or patron wanted either to



Botticelli workshop, *Portrait of a Woman (Simonetta Vespucci?)*, mid-1480s. National Gallery, London



4. Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Lady (Smeraldo Brandini?)*, c. 1471. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

give the woman a classical aura or to associate her with the Medici—or perhaps both. In the London picture, the woman wears a cloak that billows behind her and a scarf tied around her right arm. Like the cameo, the billowing drape recalls the imaginary world of antiquity, differentiating the woman from traditional portraits and suggesting the depiction of a classical, if not mythological, figure.²²

The dress of the female figure in the Berlin picture is more conventional, but in the Berlin and Frankfurt paintings the woman has an unusually large bust for a portrait. This characteristic draws attention to the female body in a way not usually seen in chaste portraits of wives, daughters, and mothers. It is closer to Botticelli's depictions of sensuous mythological women, such as Venus in *Mars and Venus*.

A final, unusual characteristic of the Simonetta images is the suggestion of movement they convey. Unlike earlier profile portraits, such as those by Pollaiuolo or Piero della Francesca, in which the woman is depicted in rigid profile, the Simonetta images reveal a hint of the eye that is usually obscured from view and show the hair falling forward on the far side of the woman's face. In each picture the woman's body is slightly turned toward the picture plane. In this way the woman is less frozen in place than are the sitters in strict profile portraits. It seems as though she might turn toward the viewer. The artist plays coyly with the concept of a profile portrait. A female figure in profile seems chaste and removed from the viewer; her gaze is averted and she pays no attention to her (male) admirer.²³ In the Simonetta images, while the semblance of chastity and modesty is preserved, the artist has given the slightest suggestion of the sitter's availability to engage with the viewer.

Not only is there a sense of movement *into* the picture plane in the Frankfurt, Berlin, and London paintings, but there is also a hint of movement *across* the picture plane. In the Frankfurt and Berlin panels, one section of the woman's hair waves behind her as though she were in motion. In the Frankfurt picture, the upright posture of the figure, the feather stretched out straight behind her head, and the lack of an interior setting give the impression that the woman might be walking forward rather than sitting for her portrait. In the Berlin piece, the sense of movement conveyed by the billowing hair is tempered somewhat by the stricter profile and the interior setting, but the asymmetrical window frame appears to impel the figure forward. In the London painting, the hair does not wave, but the woman's cloak appears to billow behind her. This motif, used to suggest wind in other paintings by Botticelli (the obvious example being Zephyr in the *Birth of Venus*), conveys the impression that the woman is moving. Billowing hair and drapery is often used by Botticelli in his depictions of mythological women, such as the Graces, Flora, and Cloris in *Primavera*, Pallas in *Pallas and the Centaur* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), and Venus and the nymph in the *Birth of Venus*, to name only the most prominent examples. Like the abundant, decorated hair, a sense of movement links the woman in the "portraits" to these other mythological figures and differentiates her from standard portraits of women. The importance of this sense of movement will be discussed further.

Botticelli and Simonetta: Whose Myth?

The central historiographic problem of the Simonetta images and of all the other pictures that have been associated with Simonetta is the isolation of the different historical layers of the myth of Simonetta. Irrefutable evidence, in prose and poetry, testifies to the adulation Simonetta received during her lifetime, and especially after her premature death, from Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici and from the circle of poets and courtiers around the Medici family. Whether this adulation was in visual, as well as written, testimony remains less clear. Did the poetic circumstances of Simonetta's death provide the motive for the creation of the *Primavera*, the portraits considered here, and/or other images? One must also consider that the fifteenth-century myth of Simonetta may have been elaborated and embroidered in the following century. Finally, modern scholarship has played its part. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing to our own day, the myth of Simonetta has often cast a powerful spell over art historians and other writers, prompting an outpouring of fantasies about Simonetta, Botticelli, Giuliano, and Lorenzo.²⁴ It is important to try to detach and analyze these various, successive layers of myth.

There can be no doubt that Lorenzo's circle promoted a "myth of Simonetta." Simonetta Cattaneo was born in about 1453 into a wealthy Genoese family. In 1468 she married Marco Vespucci, the only son of a prominent, Medici-allied family, and moved to Florence. The marriage appears to have been arranged for her by her powerful brother-in-law, Jacopo III d'Appiano, lord of Piombino.²⁵ Although she was married, Simonetta was chosen by Giuliano de' Medici as the lady for whom he would fight in a joust held on 29 January 1475. This joust was the subject of Poliziano's *Le stanze per la giostra*, in which Simonetta appears twice.²⁶ The joust was an important public ceremony

to celebrate the conclusion of an alliance between Florence, Venice, and Milan, and also to symbolize the coming-of-age of Giuliano and the power of the Medici family.²⁷ Giuliano thereafter continued to play the part of Simonetta's chivalrous lover. When Simonetta died of consumption just over a year later, on 26 April 1476, Giuliano mourned her deeply. A letter from Simonetta's father-in-law, Piero Vespucci, to Giuliano's mother, Lucrezia Tornabuoni, describes Giuliano's actions after her death:

When the blessed soul that was your Giuliano used to visit my house, he said to me many times, in the presence of Niccolo Martelli, that he was the unhappiest young man not only in Florence, but in all Italy. I had such pity for him, he aroused such sorrow, that to make him happy and give me pleasure both my son Marco and I did all we could to please him, as his kindness, correctness, and gentle breeding deserved. We gave him all of Simonetta's garments [*ogni vestimento delta Simonetta*] and her portrait [*immagine*]. Marco and I did this all with affection. He aided us with money and in every way he could.²⁸

In his *Commento*, an explication of his sonnets, Lorenzo discusses how a lover can best mourn the loss of his beloved. (He is speaking of Simonetta, although he does not name her, and he himself seems to be the lover in question.²⁹) He says that the lover "cannot experience greater comfort than by holding his mind and thoughts fixed on the *last impressions and dearest things of his sun*.'"³⁰ Simonetta's dresses and "portrait" may have been given to Giuliano for this purpose. A portrait of Giuliano by Botticelli (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) may also allude to Giuliano's mourning. In the corner of the painting is a turtledove, a symbol of loyalty to the beloved on the part of a mourner.³¹

Piero Vespucci's letter not only reveals the attentions Giuliano paid to Simonetta's memory, but it also shows that the Vespucci family curried influence with the Medici through Simonetta. By allowing Giuliano to play Petrarch to Simonetta's Laura, the Vespucci gained favors in return. When Giuliano was assassinated in the Pazzi conspiracy only two years after Simonetta's death, Piero was accused of taking part. His letter was written from prison to convince Lucrezia, Giuliano and Lorenzo's mother, of his innocence (making his demonstrations of kindness to Giuliano all the more to the point). In the letter he uses his connection to the Medici family through his daughter-in-law as a ploy for sympathy. While the actual nature of the relationship between Giuliano and Simonetta remains elusive, it is clear that public ceremony and political alliances were an important part of the game of courtly love.³²

Simonetta was ill for at least a month before she died at the age of twenty-three. Lorenzo, who was at the time in Pisa, provided a doctor to look after her and corresponded with her father-in-law, Piero, regarding her health.³³ In a great public funeral held for her, a procession of mourning citizens went from her house to the Ognissanti church. The casket was open. In response to the death of this young beauty, the beloved of Giuliano, a number of poets wrote eulogies and epigrams, some addressed to Giuliano and some to Lorenzo. Lorenzo himself was among the poets who honored Simonetta, as he explains in his *Commento*:

All the Florentines of talent, as was fitting in such a public bereavement, variously expressed their grief, some in verse and some in prose, about the bitterness of this death, and each attempted to praise her according to his own ability; and I wished to be among them, and to accompany their tears with the sonnets which follow.³⁴

Lorenzo begins his *Commento* with the four sonnets he wrote on the occasion of Simonetta's death.

A number of poems about Simonetta by other writers also survive: an elegy and a sonnet by Bernardo Pulci; a lengthy poem by the Veronese Francesco Nursio Timideo;³⁵

four Latin epigrams by Angelo Poliziano, two of which were sepulchral epitaphs;³⁶ two Latin epigrams by Naldo Naldi;³⁷ and a eulogy by Francesco Dovizi da Bibbiena, Lorenzo's *cancelliere*.³⁸ Others works may exist.³⁹ As previously mentioned, Simonetta makes two appearances as Giuliano's beloved in Poliziano's *Stanze per la giostra*.

Simonetta evidently played an important role in the public rituals of Medicean Florence. One might even speak of a "cult of Simonetta." The poems about her exalt her as a kind of civic symbol. Lorenzo and Pulci stress that all of Florence loved her and mourned her death. Pulci presents her as the city's representative in heaven:

Since she is the only person from our times (there),
He who rules above [Jove] wishes that she
Be shown especially clearly among the others⁴⁰

Simonetta and Giuliano died on the same day of the year, 26 April, two years apart. This coincidence must have struck contemporaries as significant, since Petrarch wistfully desired to die on the same date as Laura.⁴¹ It is thus possible that when the death of Giuliano was commemorated, Simonetta was remembered as well, perhaps visually as well as verbally.⁴²

While the "cult of Simonetta" had its origin in the late fifteenth century, the clear association of Simonetta's name with Botticelli's images is more recent. The mysterious portraitlike images are linked to Simonetta on the basis of a passage in Vasari, who wrote in the edition of 1568 of his *Lives of the Artists* that "in Duke Cosimo's wardrobe there are two very beautiful female heads in profile by Botticelli, one of which is said



5. Piero di Cosimo, *Portrait of a Woman (Simonetta Vespucci?)*, 1480s? Musée **Conde, Chantilly** (photo: Giraudon/Art Resource, N.Y.)

to be the mistress ["inamorata"] of Lorenzo's brother, Giuliano de' Medici."⁴³ If Simonetta is understood to be Giuliano's loved one, then presumably a portrait of her by Botticelli once existed. Perhaps Vasari saw the Berlin painting, which was once in the Palazzo Medici.⁴⁴ The profile portrait by Piero di Cosimo (fig. 5), which bears an inscription identifying the sitter as "Simonetta Vespucci," further supports the idea that portraits of Simonetta existed.⁴⁵ The woman in Piero's painting has a very elaborate hairstyle and her physiognomy is sufficiently similar to the woman in the Botticelli images to suggest that the same person might be represented.

Although the portrait by Piero di Cosimo would appear to be a representation of Simonetta, since her name is inscribed beneath it, it is not usually accepted as such. The reason for this is that Vasari described the work as a head of Cleopatra and did not mention an inscription.⁴⁶ However, tests conducted in France reveal that the inscription is contemporary with the rest of the painting. This has been interpreted as meaning that the "contemporary" inscription must be "no later than the end of the sixteenth century," thus allowing Vasari's word to stand.⁴⁷ Even if we accept this, the image still shows that by the end of the sixteenth century (and probably before) an unusual,

eroticized (bare-breasted) image of a woman was associated with Simonetta.⁴⁸

In his statement about the portrait of Giuliano's "inamorata," Vasari likely refers to Simonetta, since she was publicly celebrated and commemorated by numerous poets as Giuliano's "lady."⁴⁹ What is interesting, however, is that Vasari calls the female portrait an "inamorata," or "beloved one," rather than a wife. This suggests that the image looked different from a portrait of a dutiful wife. He may, then, have heard that it represented Simonetta. After all, he admits that "it is said to be" Giuliano's *innamorata*.

Whether or not we accept that the images from Botticelli's workshop represent Simonetta, we have seen that the connection between Simonetta and certain unusual portrait images stems back at least to the sixteenth century. We are not concerned here with nineteenth-century myth-making.

How did nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars come to the conclusion that paintings by Botticelli of Venus, Flora, or even the Madonna were likenesses of Simonetta? While the identifications, in particular those of women in the *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus*, were based in part on the correspondence of the images to certain passages in Poliziano's *Stanze*, the "portrait" images of Simonetta also played a prominent role in the development of the theory. Warburg, in his dissertation of 1893, used the Simonetta images to connect the story of Simonetta and Giuliano to Botticelli's *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus*. Warburg claimed that the sitter of the Frankfurt and Berlin portraits, whom he identified as Simonetta on the basis of the previously cited passage in Vasari, was the same woman as Flora in the *Primavera* and as the nymph on the shore in the *Birth of Venus*. Warburg concluded that both of these last two paintings were allegories composed in Simonetta's memory, in light of the profound mourning of Simonetta in Medici circles.⁵⁰

While Warburg linked Simonetta and Botticelli's women as a result of well-considered research, other writers seem simply to have liked the romantic story and found it a convenient, even titillating, way to explain many of the images of women by Botticelli and his workshop.⁵¹ However, by the 1940s and 1950s, any connection between the cult of Simonetta and any Botticellian images was viewed with suspicion. Gombrich harshly criticized the use of the romantic story of Simonetta and Giuliano to explain Botticelli's mythological paintings, preferring to interpret the images in the light of Neoplatonic philosophy.⁵² While some curtailment of the Simonetta myth was in order, the contempt for it expressed by Gombrich and those who followed him may have been too extreme. Now that the overly extended connections between Simonetta *Rutgers Art Review* 15 (1995) 45 and the various goddesses and heroines in Botticelli's paintings have been cut, scholars are reluctant to associate the cult of Simonetta with any images by Botticelli or his workshop. However, unlike the connections between Simonetta and Botticelli's mythological and religious figures, those between Simonetta and the portraitlike images are definitely not products of the nineteenth century; they extend at least to the sixteenth century.

Much current literature on the portraitlike images disregards this connection completely. In his monograph on Botticelli, Lightbown calls the pictures "portraits of *ninfe*, or fair ladies... portraits of ideal beauties, rather than real ladies." ⁵³ Campbell calls them simply, "idealized images of beautiful women."⁵⁴ Both authors disregard any relationship between the images and the cult of Simonetta, at the same time leaving the images without any particular context or interpretation.⁵⁵ One wonders where this tradition of painting idealized women came from. Lightbown suggests that the pictures relate to the "taste" for ideal heads found on majolica, but offers no explanation of how or why this "taste" developed.⁵⁶ The painting of a generic ideal of female beauty is seen as a natural goal of art. There is an unwillingness to examine in detail how such images operate. The Ettlingers reflect this attitude: wishing to brush aside problems of the identity of the sitter in the Simonetta images, they say that "it is better to leave these

charming and finely painted ladies nameless and enjoy the pictures for their own sake."⁵⁷ However, if we wish to understand how and why women are idealized in representation, we need to look more closely at the effect these images created and whence they derive.⁵⁸ An examination of the poetry written about Simonetta may contribute to our understanding of the expectations viewers brought to Botticelli's portraitlike images of a woman.

Interpreting the Simonetta Images: A Petrarchan Mistress in Verse and Image

In recent years a number of scholars have pointed to the importance of Petrarchan poetry both for conceptions of a female ideal and for the depiction of women in visual art.⁵⁹ Specific early sixteenth-century images have been related to the Petrarchan tradition.⁶⁰ Given the evidence that Botticelli's "portrait" images may indeed be tied to Simonetta, it seems reasonable to compare the Petrarchan poems written after Simonetta's death to the images that would have been painted after her death.

The idea of a painted image of a beloved lady is, in fact, an important trope of Petrarchan love poetry. In two of his sonnets, Petrarch admires Laura in a portrait by Simone Martini.⁶¹ In these sonnets the image functions as the perfect synecdoche for the Petrarchan mistress: the male lover can adore Laura from afar, but she will never respond. The image excites desire that can never be fulfilled, since the poet, unlike Pygmalion, does not have the power to make the image come alive. The painting of the beloved is an inherent part of the Petrarchan tradition and was used by various other writers.⁶²

A number of Florentine noblewomen were acclaimed as latter-day Lauras in the poetry of their admirers. The early death of a young noblewoman often elicited poems from the "Florentines of talent,"⁶³ who bonded together by honoring the beauty, virtues, and chastity of the deceased. Bernardo Pulci, in his poem about Simonetta, makes her kinship with Laura and Beatrice explicit. After her death, Simonetta, like Laura and Beatrice, joins the realm of Zeus:

Thus she joins the worthy, faithful souls;
Heaven admires her beauty,
As whoever saw her first on earth admired her;
And thus among the planets (heaven and earth) she is so prized,
That everyone who seeks her is made happy—
But Jove has drawn her to his heights.
Behold Laura and Beatrice,
Who make room for her in the eternal cloisters,
Like a new phoenix flown into heaven."⁴

The death of a young noblewoman, especially one who was the object of an unfulfilled love affair, set in place the conventions for a certain type of Petrarchan idealization.

One common trope in Petrarchan poetry is the idea of the young woman as nymph.⁶⁵ This idea is conveyed in the Simonetta pictures as well. Often the poets who eulogized Simonetta refer to her generically as a nymph, as does Pulci in the last stanza of his elegy:

Nymph, whom in the earth a cold stone covers,
Beneficent star now received into heaven,
When your light is more discovered,
Return to see my wayward country.⁶⁶

Elsewhere, Pulci more specifically refers to Simonetta as Daphne to Giuliano's Apollo.⁶⁷ Poliziano calls Simonetta a nymph in the *Stanze*.⁶⁸ In his much longer elegy of another young Florentine noblewoman, Albiera degli Albizzi, who died at the age of sixteen, Poliziano is more explicit about what such a nymph looks like:

*Foremost among all the nymphs shines the beautiful Albiera, and her beauty sheds around it the trembling light of its own splendor. Fanned by the wind, her hair floats over her white shoulders while her black eyes send forth rays of gentle light.*⁶⁹

He says her hair "made thee [Albiera] like unto Diana the huntress when it *flowed loose over thy shoulders*, and *was as the adornment of Cytherea when twisted in a golden crown around thy head*."⁷⁰ Hair, both loose and ornamented as well as in movement, is an important characteristic of the nymph.

The nymph exists not only in literary conventions, but also in the world of visual culture. Warburg pointed to a passage in Leonardo's *Trattato* in which the artist discusses how to portray the draperies of nymphs:

The true thickness of the limbs should only be disclosed in the case of a nymph or an angel, who are represented as dressed in flimsy garments which the driving winds impress around their limbs... Ensure in your draperies that the part which surrounds the figure reveals the way in which it is posed, and that part which remains behind it should be ornamented in a fluttering and outspread manner.⁷¹

Although only the movement of draperies is discussed in this passage, clearly the hair also blows in the wind, as in a drawing of nymphs by Leonardo in the Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Further written evidence for a visual conception of a nymph can be found in one of Fra Girolamo Savonarola's sermons reprimanding the Florentines for their ungodly ways:

Look at the customs of Florence: how the Florentine women have married their daughters by taking them out to show and adorning them so as to resemble nymphs, and first thing they take them to [the church of] Santa Liperata.⁷²

This passage reveals two things of interest. First, that, at least according to Savonarola, actual women were made to look like nymphs. Second, that this way of presenting a woman was considered alluring to men.

These passages by Leonardo and Savonarola reveal a relationship between a literary and a visual way of "figuring" women as nymphs. Botticelli's nymph types in his *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus* have the characteristics of moving drapery pressing against the body and fluttering hair. The similarity between these women and the woman in the Simonetta pictures has been discussed. In the Simonetta images the artist has used the visual tradition to convey the poetic conception. While Warburg suggested that Flora in the *Primavera* and the woman on the shore in the *Birth of Venus* were images of Simonetta *idealized as a nymph*, I suggest that the portrait images depict the woman, possibly Simonetta, in the role of "nymph" as constructed in love poetry.

The idea of movement is important to both the visual and literary conceptions of the nymph. In the poems about Simonetta, the woman/nymph is fleeing from the lover who pursues her. In Poliziano's *Stanze*, Giuliano pursues a deer that he cannot catch.

This deer then turns into the "nymph" Simonetta:

The beautiful creature appears to slow down
as if she were weary, but just when it seems
that he will reach or touch her, she regains
a little ground before his eyes.

The more he pursues in vain the vain image, the
more he burns in vain to pursue it; he presses
ever and ever upon her tired tracks, he draws
ever nearer but never overtakes her

.....
 but he still had not gained a step on his
 prey, and his horse was already exhausted; but,
 still following his vain hope, he came upon a
 green and flowery meadow: here, veiled in white,
 a lovely nymph appeared before him, and the
 doe vanished away.⁷³

Giuliano cannot catch what he desires; it is always fleeing before him. The myth of Apollo and Daphne aptly captures this sense of futile pursuit. Petrarch used it often in his sonnets. Pulci, addressing Simonetta in heaven, asks her to think of the world she has left behind, where her Apollo [Giuliano] grieves for his Daphne. The sense of yearning here is across vertical space; Simonetta is above, in heaven, and Giuliano is left below, on earth.⁷⁴ As was the case after Laura's death, the admirer's love continues unabated, if not enhanced. The more unattainable the nymph, the more desirable she becomes.

A suggestion of futile pursuit is also conveyed in the Simonetta images. The woman moves horizontally out of the picture frame, her hair or cloak waving behind her. She is portrayed almost in profile, looking ahead, indifferent to the viewer who might want to engage with her. As in the poems written about Simonetta, the woman is eternally caught in a position in which she is visible, but fleeing from the viewer.

The Simonetta images situate themselves between a depiction of an actual woman and that of a kind of goddess. In this way they resemble the poems composed in memory of the deceased young noblewoman. The poems celebrate a real woman who died young, who is described as almost too perfect for this world, so many were the godly virtues and so great the physical charms accumulated in her.⁷⁵ If already on earth she outshines all the others, after she dies Simonetta joins the gods in heaven. Lorenzo says the star into which she has been transformed "might contend even with Phoebus, and ask him for his chariot to be itself the cause of the light of day."⁷⁶ Pulci says she is elected to the great holy banquet and that Jove has drawn her up to his heights.⁷⁷ The poems are about a real woman, but after her death she is transformed into a divine being. The images operate similarly. The use of a portrait format suggests that the viewer was meant to see the woman as a real, rather than an ideal, person—someone who would have her portrait painted. Nevertheless, other attributes signify that the woman is not a real sitter, but a nymph or goddesses from another, imaginary world. The artist of these images, like the poets who wrote about Simonetta, makes the Florentine woman transcend her earthly environment.

This transformation is illuminated by the allegorical scene depicted on the back of the London painting (fig. 6). According to Diilberg, the scene conveys the idea that the sitter, a paragon of virtue in life, will earn immortality. For Diilberg, the forest in the background is a metaphor for the earthly life. The figure in the foreground stands at the peak of a rocky mountain that symbolizes virtue and purity. The winged figure, holding in one hand an armillary, a symbol of hope and eternity, and in the other a clump of moss, a symbol of rebirth, is about to fly heavenward. The allegory, as analyzed by Diilberg, relates closely to the ideas conveyed in the poetry about Simonetta. Significantly, the nature of the allegory suggests to Diilberg that the image on the obverse is a portrait (not an ideal), most likely a posthumous one.⁷⁸

Both the portraitlike images from Botticelli's workshop and the poems written about Simonetta bring together "real" and "ideal," or "portrait" and "nymph." At the same time they combine chastity and eroticism. While the poems exalt Simonetta as an exemplar of virtues, they also mention her sexually alluring qualities and construct her as an object of masculine, heterosexual desire. Pulci writes that she has the intelligence of Athena, the eloquence of Mercury, and the chastity of Diana, as well as the beauty [forma] of Venus.⁷⁹ In his *Commento*, Lorenzo finds her a paragon of virtue—he says she was endowed with more beauty and human *gentillesse* than any other woman—but



6. Botticelli workshop, *Allegorical Figure* (reverse of figure 3), c. 1490. National Gallery, London

admits that her greatest virtue was that she could be loved by so many men and not make them jealous.⁸⁰ The poet Timideo speaks directly of other physical charms. Not only does he describe her coral lips, rose-colored cheeks, and white neck, but also her "alabaster breast and the resplendent fruits growing there."⁸¹ The images from Botticelli's workshop, too, are both chaste and alluring. The woman is presented in near profile.⁸² She looks away from, even seems to *move* away from, the gaze of the spectator; she is presented as appropriately demure. However, her exotic hairstyle and pronounced breasts eroticize her body, attracting the gaze of the curious. There is no opposition between these chaste and sexually alluring characteristics. In part it is the woman's chastity, her refusal of the lover, that is sexually exciting. By hinting that the woman, like Daphne or some other nymph, flees to preserve her chastity, the artist makes her endlessly desirable. Similarly, in poems about Simonetta, the young noblewoman becomes even more desirable when she is dead. Both images and poems provoke a perpetual, unfulfilled desire. They are monuments to, and celebrations of, such a

desire.⁸³

Although an actual woman is referred to in the portraitlike images and eulogizing poems, she remains curiously "absent."⁸⁴ The images and poems have little to do with a sitter/subject in particular. Albiera degli Albrizzi and Simonetta, in the poems honoring them, are interchangeable in terms of both their beauty and their virtues. There is a strangely generic quality to the Simonetta images, which is probably what has lead people to think they are idealized heads. Since the woman is depicted in profile, less of a sense of expression is conveyed than in more standard portraits of the period, for example in Botticelli's *Portrait of a Lady (Smeralda Brandini?)*. The sitter does not have accoutrements, such as lush clothing and jewelry, or appropriately bound hair, to give her a particular social standing. While Simonetta may or may not be the object of depiction, the subject of the paintings is desire—the desire that served to unite the "Florentines of talent."

University of Michigan

This article is based on my Master's essay completed in 1991 at the University of Michigan. I would like to thank the Women's Studies Program for awarding me a Robin I. Thevenet Summer Research Grant. I would also like to thank Pat Simons and Leonard Barkan for their comments and Pat Simons in particular for her continued encouragement and support. Lisa Bessette and Stephen Campbell also kindly made suggestions.

1. Dempsey revived the "Simonetta theory" after a long period of neglect, if not contempt, in *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (Princeton, While Dempsey's proposal is possible—even probable, given the dense weave of circumstantial

evidence—in the end it is hypothetical. Dempsey's larger conclusions about how the *Primavera* and Laurentian culture in general combine "history" and "myth" parallel closely the conclusions I reached independently about how the Simonetta images blend "portrait" and "ideal."

2. See Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work* (New York, 1989), 313; Lome Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits* (New Haven, 1990), 6. They seem to be envisioning something like Michelangelo's *teste divine*—beautiful and ornate images assumed to have been made for their own sake.

3. Elizabeth Cropper, "The Beauty of Women: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture," in M. W. Ferguson, M. Quilligan, and N. J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago, 1986), 178.

4. For ease of reference I refer to the portraitlike paintings as the "Simonetta pictures" or "Simonetta images," although by that I do not mean to imply that they are portraits in a conventional sense.

5. Cropper, "Beauty of Women," 179. On problems in female portraiture see also Pat Simons, "Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women," in Alison Brown, ed., *Language and Images of Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 1995), 263-312.

6. See Anne Christine Junkerman, "Bellissima donna: An Interdisciplinary Study of Venetian Sensuous Half-Length Images of the Early Sixteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1988), for an important discussion of the half-length sensual portraits. Junkerman argues that the eroticism of these *Rutgers Art Review* 15 (1995) 51

images derives from various types of ambiguity in dress, gaze, action, and subject. My own interpretation of the Simonetta images owes much to her formulation.

7. Reproduced in Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 2 vols. (London, 1978), 2: no. C5.

8. Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1978], 2: no. D17.

9. Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1978], 2: no. C70.

10. Another such image is a profile relief attributed to Verrocchio in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (reproduced in John Pope-Hennessy, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, 2 vols. [London, 1964], 2: fig. 164). Although this work has never been directly connected to Simonetta, visually it has much in common with the Piero di Cosimo painting: the woman is depicted in profile with bare breasts and a cloak over one shoulder. In addition, her hair waves back from her head in a manner reminiscent of the Botticelli paintings in Frankfurt and Berlin. More conventional portraits have also sometimes been thought to represent Simonetta—for example, a profile portrait by Botticelli's workshop in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence (reproduced in Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1978], 2: no. F7).

11. Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1989], 313. While the Berlin and London versions are clearly workshop productions, I am less certain about the Frankfurt piece, which could possibly be by Botticelli himself. The drawing of the London picture lacks the finesse and delicacy of Botticelli's line. In addition, the architectural background in both the Berlin and London works is much simplified by comparison with an autograph portrait by Botticelli (compare, for example, fig. 4). The Frankfurt piece, however, does not have the tell-tale signs of a less experienced or talented hand than that of Botticelli. The poor state of

preservation of the painting makes attribution difficult. Joachim Ziemke, curator of Italian paintings at the Stadelches Kunstinstitut, believes the work is by Botticelli, whereas Nicholas Penny and Erich Schleier, curators of Italian paintings at the National Gallery and the Gemaldegalerie respectively, make no such claims for the works in their collections.

12. Given the enthusiasm for Botticelli, and especially for his depictions of women, in nineteenth-century England, the possibility that the images are forgeries must be considered. There is no evidence to suggest that they are. The unique qualities of the Frankfurt picture and the allegorical scene on the back of the London painting make them unlikely candidates. The Berlin painting was restored in 1990. The painting in Japan was examined by the Courtauld Institute in 1968 and was not judged to be a fake. This last painting was also engraved and attributed to Cimabue by the Parisian dealer Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun in 1809 (Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1978], 2:118). It seems unlikely that someone would forge a Botticelli and not recognize it as such. In addition, the print appeared before the popular demand for Botticelli's paintings. Even if one or two of the images are forgeries, the others must still be contended with.

13. Wilhelm von Bode, *Sandro Botticelli*, trans. F. Renfield and F. L. Rudston Brown (New York, 1925), 64.

14. Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1989], 57.

15. Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," *History Workshop journal* 25 (Spring 1988), 7-8 (reprinted in N. Broude and M. Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* [New York, 1992], 39-57). See also Patricia Simons, "A Profile Portrait of a Renaissance Woman in the National Gallery of Victoria," *Art Bulletin of Victoria* 28 (1987), 35-52, for an example of a profile portrait that may be deliberately archaizing.

16. One possible explanation for the use of the profile portrait at this late date is that the sitter was already dead at the time the portraits were painted, as Simonetta most likely was at the time these images were made. See Rab Hatfield, "Five Early Renaissance Portraits," *Art Bulletin* 47 (1965), 325-329.

17. Brides did sometimes wear their hair loose; see Rona Goffen, "Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* and Marriage" in Broude and Garrard, *Expanding Discourse*, 113. Hair was elaborately arranged for festivals like Giuliano's joust, so it is possible that the hair ornamentation in the Simonetta images makes reference to such ceremonial styling. See Aby Warburg, *La Rinascita del paganesimo antico*, trans. Emma Cantinori (Florence, 1966), 50-51.

18. Mary Rogers "The Decorum of Women's Beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the Representation of Women in Sixteenth-Century Painting," *Renaissance Studies* 2 (1988), 63, points out the tensions concerning women's hair in Renaissance tracts about female beauty. Loose hair was considered erotic and appealing, but it was also dangerous because it could "ensnare" a man. Thus, to "keep desire in check," women, especially married women, were to wear their hair bound up. "Golden tresses tumbling loose, long and free cast a potent erotic spell, being unfamiliar in contemporary women and connected with the alluring goddesses and sirens from the fantasy past of pagan antiquity or romance."

19. Botticelli's Madonnas sometimes wear their hair loose, but it is arranged simply and is usually covered with a veil.

20. P. Bober and R. Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture* (London, 1986), 74.

21. In Ghirlandaio's frescoes in Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Ludovica Tornabuoni probably wears a necklace given to her by her father; Simons, "Women in Frames," 9.

22. While the gauzy dress of the woman in the Frankfurt and London paintings may seem classicizing, it may have been a form of contemporary dress. See Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1978], 2:117-118; Emile Bertaux, "Botticelli costumier," *Etudes d'histoire et d'art* (Paris, 1911), 115-174.

23. See Simons, "Women in Frames," 7.

24. An influential early identification of Simonetta as Venus in the *Birth of Venus* can be found in a note by the Reverend St. John Tyrwhitt in Ruskin's essay "Ariadne Horentina;" see *Works of John Ruskin* (New York, 1885), 10:225-228. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry: 1893 Text*, ed. Donald Hill (Berkeley, 1980), 47, also claimed Simonetta was Botticelli's principal model. Both authors speak of an unspecified "tradition" that associates Simonetta with these images. A more literary example of such fantasies is Maurice Hewlett, *Quattrocentista: How Sandro Botticelli Saw Simonetta in the Spring* (Portland, Maine, 1898). For a list of scholars on Botticelli who followed this trend see E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (Oxford, 1978), 203, n. 17. Not all early twentieth-century Botticelli scholars concurred with the Simonetta theory. Herbert Home, *Botticelli, Painter of Florence* (1908; reprint, Princeton, 1980), 52-54, spoke out adamantly against it, calling it a "pretty fiction" and "a fantastic medley of misconceptions." For a more recent fantasy see Paul Theroux, "Mortal Goddess: Unraveling the Mysteries of Simonetta Vespucci, the Woman Who Was the Renaissance Ideal," *Art and Antiques* (March 1988), 85-122.

25. Achille Neri, "La Simonetta," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 5 (1885), 132-135.

26. She is mentioned by name in bk. 1, v. 52, and bk. 2, v. 10. See *The Stanze of Angelo Poliziano*, trans. David Quint (Amherst, Mass., 1979), 27, 73. Inexplicably, Dempsey, *Portrayal of Love*, 131, writes that "Simonetta is never directly named in Politian's *Stanze*."

27. See Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1989], 61-64; Gaetano Poggi, "La giostra medicea del 1475 e la 'pallade' del Botticelli," *L'Arte* 5 (1902), 71-77. See also Isidoro del Lungo, *Florentia: uomini e cose del Quattrocento*

(Florence, 1887), 391-412.

28. German Arciniegas, *Amerigo and the New World*, trans. Harriet de Onis (New York, 1955), 56. The accuracy of Arciniegas's translation from Italian into Spanish is questionable. The original letter (Archivio di Stato, Florence, Archivio Mediceo avanti al Principato, 88, 247) has suffered damage, possibly in the flood of 1966. Unfortunately, Arciniegas did not supply the original Italian. I would like to thank Pat Simons, F. W. Kent, Gino Corti (who is responsible for the transcription quoted here), Armando Petrucci, and Franca Nardelli for their help in trying to decipher the passage: "Quando labene[de] tta anima di Giuliano vostro usava in chasa piu volte mi disse alia presenzada Nichold Martelli era il peggio chontento giovane nonche di Firenze, ma d'Italia. Ed io n'ebi tanta chompasione e dolore ch'io desideravo darlli tutti quelli piaceri, e spassi e chontenti che per Marcho e per me sipote fare, chome meritava la sua bonta, onesta e gientileza o lui chonpia...[?] ogni vestimento della Simonetta privatomi [?] dellasua immagine averefatto Marcho ed io un gran chapittale di lui, servitocci e di danari e di quello pottio [?] chome sarebe stato possibile..." The end of the passage is difficult for two reasons. First, the grammar of the sentence is unclear; second, there is damage to the document precisely where it is most interesting. Tire words just before "ogni vestimento della Simonetta" ("all of Simonetta's clothing") and before "della sua immagine" ("of her image") cannot be made out for certain.

29. In the *Commento*, Lorenzo constructs Simonetta as the first love of his life; see Dempsey, *Portrayal of Love*, 125-126.

30. Translation from Angelo Li pari, *The Dolce St HNovo According to Lorenzo de' Medici* (New Haven, 1936), 150.

"Non pu6 avere maggior refrigerio che tenere la mente e il pensiero volto alle ultime impressione e piu care cose del suo sole" (Lorenzo de' Medici, *Tutte le open*; ed. Gigi Cavalli, 3 vols. [Milan, 1958], 2:120).

31. See Herbert Friedmann, "Two Paintings by Botticelli in the Kress Collection" in *Studies in the History of Art Dedicated to William E. Suida on His Eightieth Birthday* (London, 1959), 116-123. Although it is tempting *Rutgers Art Review* 15 (1995) 53

to see the Simonetta images as possible pendants to several surviving portraits of Giuliano by Botticelli, I have not been able to find any convincing pairings.

32. The complicated politics behind Simonetta and Giuliano's relationship are beyond the scope of this investigation. Piero served as a spy for Lorenzo through Simonetta's brother-in-law, the lord of Piombino, who was a relative of the king of Naples. (Piero discusses this in his letter to Lucrezia Tornabuoni.) Simonetta's mother also used her daughter's connection to the Medici; after Simonetta's death, she wrote to Lorenzo asking him to look after Simonetta's niece and nephew (Neri, "Simonetta," 139). Lorenzo arranged for the niece, Semiramide d'Appiano, the daughter of the lord of Piombino, to marry his own cousin, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. The wedding took place on 19 July 1482 (Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1989], 122). According to archival documents cited by M. Levi d'Ancona, Borf/ce/li's *Primavera* (Florence, 1983), 27, n. 10, Lorenzo himself paid the very large dowry of 2,000 florins. (It has been argued that Botticelli's *Primavera* was painted on the occasion of this marriage.) Evidently Lorenzo was keen on an alliance with Simonetta's relatives and very likely used the connection between Giuliano and Simonetta for political purposes.

33. Neri, "Simonetta," 136.

34. Translation from Sara Sturm, *Lorenzo de Medici* (New York, 1974), 69. Lorenzo, *Opere*, 2:118. Information about the funeral is taken from Lorenzo's account.

35. The Pulci poems and part of the poem by Timideo are published in Neri, "Simonetta," 139-147. The first edition of the Pulci poems is *Bucoliche elegantissime composte da Bernardo Pulci fiorentino et da Francesco de Azzochi senese et da Hieronimo Benivieni fiorentino et da Iacopo Fiorina de Boninsegni senese* (Florence, 1494). The entire poem by Timideo can be found in the Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence (hereafter BNF), cod. Magliabecchiana, II, 2, 75, fols. 192v.-202r.

36. *Prose volgari ineditee poesie latinee greche editee inedite di Angelo Ambrogini Poliziano*, ed. Isidoro del Lungo (Florence, 1867), 149-150.

37. See Naldus Naldus, *Epigrammaton Liber*, ed. A. Perosa (Budapest, 1943), 12-13. BNF, cod. Magliabecchiana VII, 9, 1057, fol. 13.

38. Accademia dei Lincei, Rome, cod. Corsiniano 582, fols. 80v.-81r.

39. Home, *Botticelli*, 53, for example, says that Michele Marullo and Luigi Pulci each wrote an epigram to Giuliano on this occasion. A. Rochon, *La Jeunesse de Laurent de Medicis (1449-1478)* (Paris, 1963), 246, n. 82, says there is a relevant poem by Girolamo Benivieni. It is also possible that Giuliano himself wrote poems about Simonetta. He did write poetry and Poliziano writes that Giuliano gave him the concept for one of the epigrams about Simonetta (*Prose Volgari*, 150).

40. Neri, "Simonetta," 146:

Essendo unica stata a' tempi nostri,
Così vuol che costei chi lassu regna,
Fra tutte l'altre più chiara si mostri.

I would like to thank Thomas Mussio for his help with all the verse translations not otherwise acknowledged.

41. *Petrarch's Lyric Poems, the Rime sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 456-457.
42. Unfortunately, it is not known exactly when the poems about Simonetta were composed. Timideo's poem is listed in the Medici library inventory of 1495 (see "Inventario della libreria medicea privata compilato nel 1495," *Archivio Storico Italiano*, ser. 3, vol. 20 [1874], 76).
43. "Nella guardroba del signor duca Cosimo sono di sua mano due teste di femmina in profilo, bellissime; una delle quali si dice che fu l'innamorata di Giuliano de' Medici fratello di Lorenzo" (Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori negli redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Beltrami and Paola Barocchi [Florence, 1966], 3:519). Translation from Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth, 1966), 230. Since this passage was added to the second edition of Vasari's *Vite*, in 1568, it seems likely that Vasari actually saw the image while working for the duke. However, Vasari's portrait identifications are not always reliable; see note 49.
44. The painting was bought from the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in 1875 (H. Ulmann, *Botticelli* [Munich, 1893], 54-55).
45. The painting by Piero di Cosimo has been taken to be the image by Botticelli mentioned by Vasari. See, for example, J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle, *A History of Painting in Italy*, vol. 4 (London, 1911), 266.
46. Vasari, *Vite*, 6:71.
47. Elisabeth de Boissard and Valerie Lavergne-Durey, *Chantilly, Musee Conde. Peintures de l'ecole italienne* (Paris, 1988), 120. This is despite the fact that the findings of the Laboratoire de Recherche des Musees de France in 1970 are unequivocal: "le reseau de craquelures, continu et homogene sur toute la surface de la peinture montre nettement que le bandeau et l'inscription ne font partie de la pate originaire." Italics quoted from the report in the curatorial files at the museum. It is also possible that when Vasari saw the painting the inscription was covered up, or that Vasari simply did not remember it. In terms of the composition, it seems unlikely that the inscription could have been added later, since something would have to have been in its place. Ultraviolet and infrared images reveal nothing beneath this area and without an inscription the band would make no sense visually; it is not an illusionistic "ledge." De Boissard and Lavergne-Durey assume that the inscription must have been added later, possibly when the painting passed into the Vespucci family. The painting was purchased from the Vespucci in 1841, but when it entered their collection is not known. It is surely quite possible that the Vespucci bought the painting because it had their name on it. In support of the theory that the image depicts Cleopatra see Anne Derbes, "Piero di Cosimo, Simonetta Vespucci and Cleopatra," in J. R. Brink and P. R. Baldini, *Italian Renaissance Studies in Arizona* (River Forest, 111, 1989), 113-129; Sharon Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo: Fiction, Invention and Fantasia* (London, 1993), 93-101.
48. The physiognomy of the woman in Piero di Cosimo's image also resembles that of the woman in the Botticelli workshop paintings. Like the Botticelli woman she has an ornate, elaborate hairstyle, and the cloak around her shoulder resembles that of the woman in the London picture. It seems possible that Piero di Cosimo based his work on one of the paintings by Botticelli or on another version of the Botticelli "portraits." If the painting is accepted as an early work by Piero di Cosimo, it would be contemporary with the paintings by Botticelli's workshop.
49. Home, *Botticelli*, 53, claims the *innamorata* must be a woman of the Gorini family, the mother of Giuliano's illegitimate son Giulio, later Clement VII. However, if Vasari meant to allude to her, one would think he would call her the mother of Clement VII. It is, of course, also possible that Vasari was wrong about who is represented; after all, in the same passage in which he refers to the portrait of Giuliano's *innamorata*, he calls Lucrezia Tomabuoni Lorenzo's wife when actually she was his mother.
50. Warburg, *Rinascita del paganesimo*, 47-54.
51. For example, Tyrwhitt contemplated the idea of Simonetta posing in the nude for Botticelli. He imagined that "she seems not quite to have 'liked it' or been an accustomed model," leaving the reader wondering what else she might not have "quite liked" (*Works of John Ruskin*, 10: 227).
52. Gombrich, *Images*, 37-38. Dempsey, *Portrayal of Love*, 120, writes that "ever since Gombrich wrote these words, scholars have nearly unanimously been at pains to dissociate the *Primavera* from the poetic myth of Simonetta—a myth that was in fact the creation of Lorenzo and Politian, but that was now ridiculed and branded as 'Swinburnian,' the stuff merely of romantic legend."
53. Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1989], 313.
54. Lome Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits* (New Haven, 1990), 6.
55. Stefan Buske, "Weibliches Brustbildnis (Idealbildnis Simonetta Vespucci?)," *Kleine Werkmonographie* [Stadelsches Kunstinstitut] 57 (Frankfurt, 1988), n.p., is less able to disregard the connection to Simonetta: his "Bella" of the images embodies ideal female beauty, which at the Medici court was equated with Simonetta Vespucci.
56. Lightbown, *Botticelli* [1989], 313. Dempsey, *Portrayal of Love*, 132, notes that those who term the images "ideal" have given "insufficient attention to how remarkable an imaginary 'portrait' would be at such a date."
57. L. D. and Helen Ettlinger, *Botticelli* (New York, 1977), 168.

58. Cropper, "Beauty of Women," 179, writing about "portraits of unknown beautiful women," identifies the tendency in art history to accept this category without question. She states: "Critical interpretation of many of these images of women becomes possible only when it is recognized that they belong to a special class of paintings existing in relation to a particular set of expectations on the part of the beholder and painter."

Rutgers Art Review 15 (1995) 55

59. Nancy Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Winter 1981), 265, writes that Petrarch's "role in the history of the interpretation and the internalization of woman's 'image' by both men and women can scarcely be overemphasized," and that Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* "informed the Renaissance norm of a beautiful woman." Cropper, "Beauty of Women," 181. suggests that the conventions of lyric poetry and courtly love "provided the motive for nonnarrative images of women."

60. Giovanni Pozzi, "Il ritratto della donna nella poesia d'inizio Cinquecento e la pittura di Giorgione," in R. Pallucchini, ed., *Giorgione e l'umanesimo veneziano* (Florence, 1981), connects Bartolomeo Veneto's *Flora* (?) (Stadelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt), Titian's *Allegory of Vanity* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich), and Giorgione's *Laura* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) to Petrarch's lyric tradition. Cropper, "Beauty of Women," 183, n. 15, mentions that Neroccio de Landi's *Portrait of a Young Woman* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) and Ghirlandaio's *Giovanna degli Albizzi* (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid) should be interpreted in light of Petrarch's sonnets about a painting of Laura. Elsewhere she discusses Parmigianino's relation to *Petrarchismo* (Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, *Petrarchismo*, and the Vernacular Style," *Art Bulletin* 58 [1976], 374-394). See also Anne Christine Junkerman, "The Lady and the Laurel: Gender and Meaning in Giorgione's *Laura*," *Oxford Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1993), 49-58; Elise Goodman, "Petrarchism in Titian's *The Lady and the Musician*," *Storia dell'arte* 49 (1983), 179-186. Jennifer Fletcher, "Bernardo Bembo and Leonardo's Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci," *Burlington Magazine* 131 (December 1989), 811-816, points out that Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra was probably painted for her Petrarchan lover rather than for her husband. Cropper, "Beauty of Women," 183-189, also identified the image as a Petrarchan mistress, although for different reasons.

61. *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, 176-179.

62. For a discussion of such poems and images see Mary Rogers, "Sonnets on Female Portraits from Renaissance North Italy," *Word and Image* 2 (October 1986), 291-305. In a portrait by Pontormo, Alessandro de' Medici is shown depicting his beloved in profile. Leo Steinberg, "Pontormo's *Alessandro de' Medici*, or I Only Have Eyes for You," *Art in America* 63 (January-February 1975), 62-65.

63. Lorenzo, *Opere*, 2:118, referred to those who wrote about Simonetta as "fiorentini ingegni."

64. Neri, "Simonetta," 145-146:

Così giunta fra degne alme più fide,
Marivigliasi il ciel di sua bellezza.
Come fe' prima in terra chi la vide;
Et così tra' pianeti si s'apprezza,
Che ognun cerca di lei farsi felice
Ma Giove l'ha tirata alia sua altezza.
Ecco Laura bella et Beatrice,
Che gli fan loco negli eterni chiostrì,
Come volata in ciel nuova fenice.

65. Laura is closely identified with the nymph Daphne, who is pursued by Apollo. The term "nymph" itself had various meanings in the classical tradition. According to Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 173, the term nymph was ambiguous, since it could refer to divine beings inhabiting tree or brooks, brides, or any young woman.

66. Neri, "Simonetta," 146:

Nympha, che in terra un freddo saxo copre,
Benigna Stella hor su nel ciel gradita,
Quando la luce tua vie più si scopre,
Torna a veder la mia patria smarrita.

67. Neri, "Simonetta," 142.

68. *Stanze of Angela Poliziano*, 20-21.

69. Italics mine. The poem was written in Latin; see *Renaissance Latin Verse*, ed. A. Perosa and J. Sparrow, (Chapel Hill, 1979), 126-132. The English translation given here appears in Isidoro del Lungo, *Women of Florence*, trans. Mary Steegman (London, 1907), 165.

56

70. Italics mine. Del Lungo, *Women of Florence*, 166.

71. Warburg, *Rinascita del paganesimo*, 55. Translation from *Leonardo on Painting*, ed. Martin Kemp (New Haven, 1989), 156. It is interesting that Leonardo puts angels and nymphs in the same category. They are figures whose naked bodies can be revealed through drapery. Both can be sexualized to a degree, but are

sexually ambiguous. They are made "pretty" and sexually titillating, but are beyond reach.

72. Translation mine. Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Amos e Zaccaria*, ed. Paolo Ghiglieri (Rome, 1971-1972), 2:25: "Guarda che usanze ha Firenze: come le donne fiorentine hanno maritate le loro fanciulle, le menono a mostra e acconcianle la che paiano ninfe, e la prima cosa le menono a Santa Liperata."

73. Translation and original from *Stanze of Angelo Poliziano*, 18-21:

La bella fera, come stanca fosse,
piu lenta tuttavia par che sen vada;
ma quando par che gia la stringa o tocchi,
picciol campo riprende avanti alii occhi.
Quanto piu segue invan la vana effigie
tanto piu di seguirla invan s'accende;
tuttavia preme sue stanche vestigie,
sempre la giunge, e pur mai non la prende:
ne pur d'un passo ancor la preda avanza,
e gia tutto el destrier sente affannato;
ma pur seguendo sua vana speranza,
pervenne in un fiorito e verde prato:
ivi sotto un vel candido li apparve
lieta una ninfa, e via la fera sparve.

74. Neri, "Simonetta," 142. The poem is dedicated to Giuliano, so he is the implied "Apollo." The primary movement conveyed in the poems composed after Simonetta's death is upward, as Simonetta ascends to heaven in a kind of apotheosis, leaving her lover(s) behind. This movement is suggested in the second part of Poliziano's *Stanze*, which is believed to have been finished after Simonetta's death. Giuliano has a dream in which:

he saw his sweet treasure taken away from him,
he saw his nymph enveloped in a sad cloud,
cruelly taken from before his eyes.

Stanze of Angelo Poliziano, 84-85.

75. Timideo writes that:

all virtues were in Simonetta;
What is perfect man cannot talk about,
She alone was perfect in potential
In whom the first and last god has a home
Fur tutte in Simonetta le virtute;
Quel che perfectio non si pub dir, huomo,
Lei fu sola perfecta per potentia
De chi lo primo et ultimo deo ha domo.

Neri, "Simonetta," 139.

76. Translation from Lipari, *Dolce Stil Novo*, 136. Lorenzo, *Opere*, 2: 118.

77. Neri, "Simonetta," 144, 146. Pulci even goes so far as to say that she is the only one of her times to be so honored:

Since she is the only person [*stata*] from our times [there],
He who rules above [Jove] wishes that she
Be shown especially clearly among the others.

Rutgers Art Review 15 (1995) 57

Neri, "Simonetta," 146. Simonetta has a very public persona in Pulci's poem. She is less the lost love of a particular man than a symbol of Florentine pride.

78. Angelica Diilberg, *Privatsportrdis: Geschichte und Ikonologie einer Gattung im 15. und 16. lahrhundert* (Berlin, 1990), 134-136. Diilberg does not mention any connection between the image and Simonetta. She does not make any claims for the image being a traditional portrait, but argues that it is not purely ideal; see especially her n. 849.

79. Neri, "Simonetta," 141.

80. *Autobiography of Lorenzo de' Medici*, 58-59.

81. Neri, "Simonetta," 140. See Vickers, "Diana Described," for a discussion of the itemization of Laura's beauty in Petrarch's poems. Albiera is also constructed as sexually alluring; Poliziano, in his elegy of her, writes that "young and old, all admire Albiera; of iron must he be formed whose manhood is unmoved at sight of her virginal beauty" (translation from Del Lungo, *Women of Florence*, 165).

82. Simons, "Women in Frames," 7, has suggested that the profile format was conducive to the portrayal of the feminine virtues of chastity and decorousness.

83. This combination of chastity (or piety) and eroticism is noted by Dempsey, *Portrayal of Love*, 98, in his analysis of Lucrezia's appeal for Lorenzo. In a letter to Lorenzo, Sigismondo della Stufa (Albiera's fiance) describes Lucrezia exiting from the church after confession: "I met her on the paving stones of the Servi

and she seemed to have confessed and been completely penitent of her sins, with no fire at all, such that you never saw a thing so beautiful, with her black clothing and head veiled, with such soft steps that it seemed the stones and the walls bowed in reverence as she went along her way. I do not want to go on saying more, lest you fall into sin in these holy days."

84. Cropper, "Beauty of Women," 181, writes that "the painting of a beautiful woman, like the lyric poem, may become its own object, the subject being necessarily absent."