

Abstract

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This paper examines the pictorial composition of Andrea Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* and its relation to the culture of letters and antiquarianism present in the *studiolo* of Isabella d'Este Gonzaga. By analyzing Mantegna's use of *contrapposto*, a visual motif stemming from the rhetorical figure of "antithesis," I argue that the artist formally engages Classical rhetoric and the principles of Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura*. Mantegna's dialogue with Albertian and rhetorical theory visually frames the narrative of Mars and Venus in a way that ultimately frames the viewer's understanding of Isabella's character as a patron of the arts. But it also has ramifications for how the viewer understands Mantegna's activities as a painter. By focusing my investigation on the significance of pictorial form and Mantegna's process of imitation, I look to emphasize the intellectual nuances of Isabella's approach to image making and to link Mantegna's textual knowledge to his visual recuperation of Classical art.

MANTEGNA'S *MARS AND VENUS*: THE PURSUIT OF PICTORIAL ELOQUENCE

By

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MANTEGNA'S *MARS AND VENUS*: THE PURSUIT OF PICTORIAL ELOQUENCE

The earliest extant commentary on Andrea Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* is a poem written around 1498, a few short months after documents place this image in the *studiolo* of Isabella d'Este Gonzaga.¹ The author is Battista Fiera, Mantegna's friend and a humanist attached to the Gonzaga court, just the sort of individual one would expect to have an intimate understanding of Mantegna's painting, as well as access to it in Isabella's quarters. This poem, however, is an apology addressed to Isabella, Fiera's way of atoning for misreading the *Mars and Venus*.

To the Marchioness Isabella: Our Apelles painted for you a Venus of beautiful form, and (to do it) he painted nothing more than your form, Isabella. He had also painted the Muses, sweet euphony having been created, approaching you from all sides in united dances, a pleasing thing. Hence the poet in a witty poem, having declared you to be Venus, said you had Mars' marriage bed as your own. The rest he left unsaid, out of respect for the honor of the picture —was he even perhaps thinking the work would speak for itself? But, however, carelessly he had not seen the angry smith moving vengeful hands against Mars. Steropes sweats at the flames; Etna re-echoes Brontes; and the right hand of Piracmon was making fetters. As a result (of the poet's negligence) the quarrels of a highly ridiculous dispute arise. Nor does anything in the whole city sound more entertaining. Fair Isabella, he is sorry to have called you Venus, but (it was) an image of you (that) had been the source of the poet's fancy. You are not really Venus, are you, (even) if (in real life) you are united in a chaste bed with a 'Mars'? You are not really Venus, are you, (even) if Apelles makes a Venus out of you?²

Fiera makes the circumstances rather clear. He obviously saw Mantegna's painting. He penned a few verses intended to please Isabella, but he made the connection

¹ Roger Jones, "'What Venus Did with Mars': Battista Fiera and Mantegna's *Parnassus*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 44 (1981): 198.

² Translation from Jones, "'What Venus Did with Mars'," 193, n. 4. See also Stephen J. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2004), 125. For an interesting but problematic interpretation of this poem in relation to Isabella's supposed inability to appreciate Fiera's creative initiative, see Jan L. de Jong, "Word Processing in the Italian Renaissance: Action and Reaction with Pen and Paintbrush," *Visual Resources* 19 (2003): 270-274.

between the *marchesa* and the figure of Venus too direct. “Hence the poet in a witty poem, having declared you to be Venus, said you had Mars’ marriage bed as your own.” Thus, while attesting to the fact that it was fashionable to identify patrons with ancient deities in the Renaissance, Fiera raises questions concerning decorum in such matters.³ However, it is important to note that the poet does not deny the connection between Isabella and Venus. He qualifies it, and this qualification brackets the entire poetic composition. The poem begins, “Our Apelles painted for you a Venus of beautiful form, and (to do it) he painted nothing more than your form, Isabella”: “*Formosam Venerem noster tibi pinxit Apelles, et tantum Formam pinxit Elisa tuam*” in the original Latin. The final verses reiterate this issue, making the matter of representation even more enigmatic: “You are not really Venus, are you, (even) if (in real life) you are united in a chaste bed with a ‘Mars’? You are not really Venus, are you, (even) if Apelles makes a Venus out of you?”⁴ Part of what Fiera is doing here is simply being clever. He is making a pun with the “*bella*” in Isabella’s name. But the way he complicates the issue of representation and concentrates on concepts like “Form” and “Beauty” suggests that his verses are more than just puns, for they point to a deeper understanding of Mantegna’s painting.

This paper explores the intersections among Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus*, ancient rhetorical theory, and Leon Battista Alberti’s concept of “pictorial composition.”⁵ I argue

³ Jones, “‘What Venus Did with Mars,’” 194.

⁴ Jones, “‘What Venus Did with Mars,’” 193.

⁵ In this paper, I use the Latin version of Alberti’s text in *On Painting and On Sculpture*, ed. and trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972). Henceforth, “Alberti.” Like Mantegna’s painting, *De Pictura* had a particularly strong connection to the humanist community of Mantua. Alberti dedicated his Latin text to Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, but the marquis was a *condottiere* not a humanist. This dedication reflects the interests of and perhaps even locates the text within the circle of Vittorino da Feltre, Gianfrancesco’s court librarian and the head master of the Casa Giocosa. As Michael Baxandall has shown, Mantegna was one of the few Renaissance artists who could have internalized Alberti’s *De Pictura*. Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350-1450* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 121-139. For a discussion

that Mantegna's use of *contrapposto*, a visual motif that stems from the rhetorical figure of "antithesis," creates a powerful, syntactical link between the *Mars and Venus* and the linguistically charged environment of Isabella d'Este's *studiolo*.⁶ The way Mantegna frames the narrative of Mars and Venus ultimately frames the viewer's understanding of Isabella d'Este as a patron, but it also has ramifications for how the viewer understands Mantegna as a painter. By focusing my analysis on the meaning of form and Mantegna's process of "imitation," I propose a reading of this painting that links Mantegna's artistic recuperation of antiquity to the humanist culture of letters, while exploring the intellectual nuances of Isabella d'Este's approach to image making.

of Mantegna's relation to Alberti and Albertian art theory, see Leo Steinberg, "Leon Battista Alberti e Andrea Mantegna," and Keith Christiansen, "Rapporti presunti, probabili e (forse anche) effettivi fra Alberti e Mantegna," both in *Leon Battista Alberti*, eds. Joseph Rykwert and Anne Engel (Milan: Electa, 1994), 330-335, 336-357; Kristen Lippincott, "Mantegna and the *Scientia* of Painting," in *Mantegna and Fifteenth-Century Court Culture*, eds. Francis Ames-Lewis and Anka Bednarek (Sussex: Birkbeck College, 1993), 45-55; Jack Greenstein, *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For information pertaining to Alberti in Mantua, see Evelyn Welch, "The Gonzaga Go Shopping: Commercial and Cultural Relationships between Milan and Mantua in the Fifteenth Century" in *Leon Battista Alberti e il Quattrocento: Studi in onore di Cecil Grayson e Ernst Gombrich*, ed. Luca Chiavoni, Gianfranco Ferlisi, and Maria Vittoria Grassi (Florence: Olschki, 2001): 269-285.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the connection between *contrapposto* and the rhetorical structure of antithesis, see David Summers, "Contrapposto: Style and Meaning in Renaissance Art," *The Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 336-361. This paper is deeply indebted to Summers' ideas. See also, David Summers, "Maniera and Movement: *The Figura Serpentinata*," *Art Quarterly* 35 (1972): 269-301, reprinted in *Readings in Italian Mannerism*, Liana De Girolami Cheney, ed. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997), 273-313; John Shearman, *Mannerism: Style and Civilization* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 81-91. Other articles that discuss the significance of *contrapposto* in Renaissance art include, Jodi Cranston, "Tropes of Revelation in Raphael's *Transfiguration*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (2003): 1-25; Joseph Manca, "Moral Stance in Italian Renaissance Art: Image, Text, and Meaning," *Artibus et Hhistoriae* 22 (2001): 51-76.

Battista Fiera's focus on the narrative of Venus determines my own.⁷ His efforts to make sense of this complicated image, and the fact that he was indeed wrong inform my understanding of the painting's function, as well. Within the *studiolo*, the *Mars and Venus* was the center of discursive games and competitive interpretation. Chambers such as the room in which Mantegna's painting hung functioned as a private study for reading and connoisseurship and a public gallery for diplomatic exchange and the display of antiquities. The courtly games and intellectual discourse that took place in Isabella's *studiolo* were a form of spectacle, a performance that allowed Isabella to fashion a cultivated persona, a public image of her private self, complete with connotations of erudition, antiquarianism, *virtù*, and *sprezzatura*. As part of this performance, this painting allows us to glimpse the intricate nexus of cultural politics, humanist thought, and artistic production that form what Stephen Campbell has termed, "*studiolo* culture."⁸

⁷ Odoardo Stivinis's 1542 Inventory of Isabella's *studiolo* describes the image as, "Mars and Venus standing in a state of pleasure, with Vulcan, and Orpheus [sic] who plays music and nine dancing nymphs." As in Fiera's poem, the story of Mars and Venus is the central focus. The title of this image should follow the documentary evidence. It is not until the seventeenth century that this image takes on the title, "*Parnassus*." Ronald Lighbown, *Mantegna* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 222; Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 124.

That Mantegna's painting is fundamentally about the story of Mars and Venus might help explain Fiera's mistake in the first place. When the poet interpreted Venus as a representation of Isabella, he logically drew on a pictorial tradition associated with the Renaissance interior, Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* being a potential precedent. For a discussion of the figures of Mars and Venus serving as portraits of the patrons within the context of marriage, see Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper Torchbooks, 1939), 129-169. Cf. Elisabeth Schröter, *Die Ikonographie des Themas Parnass vor Raphael: Die Schrift- und Bildtraditionen von der Spätantike bis zum 15. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1977), 280-300. For Botticelli's *Mars and Venus*, see E.H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1945): 7-60; Paul Barolsky, *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 33-46; Ronald W. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Quattrocento Neoplatonism and Medici Humanism in Botticelli's Mythological Paintings* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1985); Gottfried Sello, "Venus and Mars: Ehebruch unter Göttern," *Art* 11 (1990): 108-114; Charles Dempsey, "Lorenzo's ombra" in *Lorenzo il Magnifico e il suo mondo: Convegno internazionale di studi, Firenze, 9-13 giugno 1992*, ed. Giancarlo Garfagnini (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1994), 341-355; idem., *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁸ Wolfgang Liebenwein first linked the *studiolo* space to the humanist ideal of scholarly leisure in *Studiolo: Die Entstehung eines Raumtyps und seine Entwicklung bis um 1600* (Berlin: Verlag, 1977). Paula

As Fiera shows, the meaning of Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* eluded some of those counted among its most intimate and immediate observers. The painting was intentionally difficult to understand, but only insofar as it was meant to make a spectacle out of the difficulty overcome. Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* was a painting meant to stimulate cultivated interpretations. It was meant to inspire Isabella's learned guests to weave verbal tapestries of eloquence, to transform the viewer into an orator. This painting demanded a specific kind of spectator, a specific kind of erudition, a viewer well versed in the intricacies of ancient art and texts. Like the books placed alongside it, the *Mars and Venus*, I will argue, was meant to be read, read aloud even, and it was by no means an easy read.

Findlen and Dora Thornton offer excellent analyses that examine the *studiolo* from the standpoint of possession and consumption. Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); 83-114; Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Paula Findlen, "Possessing the Past: The Material World of the Italian Renaissance," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 83-114. Thornton, in particular, places the study within the wider context of the Renaissance interior, focusing on middle-class domestic furnishings rather than courtly architecture. More recently, Stephen Campbell explored what he calls "*studiolo* culture," developing the insights of Liebenwein, Findlen, and Thornton, and positing an interpretation of the Renaissance study that focuses on the issue of ambivalence. "*Studiolo* culture" signifies a form of cultural exchange that blended the practice of private self-cultivation with the public display of wealth and riches. An essential part of this concept is the tension between the humanist ideal of private study and retreat from worldly life and the courtly practice of material display. Stephen J. Campbell, "Mantegna's *Parnassus*: Reading, Collecting, and the *Studiolo*" in *Revaluing Renaissance Art*, eds. Gabriele Neher and Rupert Shepherd (New Haven: Ashgate, 2000), 69-87; idem., "Giorgione's *Tempest*, *Studiolo* Culture, and the Renaissance Lucretius," *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (2003): 299-332; idem., *The Cabinet of Eros*, particularly 27-113. My debt to Campbell's conception of the *studiolo* space will become increasingly apparent as this paper unfolds.

For more information regarding the Renaissance interior, see Peter Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1991). *Renaissance Studies* recently published a volume dedicated to this issue as well. See in particular Marta Ajmar-Wollheim, Flora Dennis, and Ann Matchette, "Introduction: Approaching the Italian Renaissance Interior: Sources, Methodologies, Debates"; Maria Ruvoldt, "Sacred to Secular, East to West: The Renaissance Study and Strategies of Display"; Philip Mattox, "Domestic Space in the Florentine Renaissance Palace"; and Ann Matchette, "To have and to have not: The Disposal of Household Furnishings in Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 20 (2006): 623-628, 640-657, 658-673, 701-716 respectively. For other discussions of specific *studioli* and Renaissance courts, see Luciano Cheles, *The Studiolo of Urbino: An Iconographic Study* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1986); Stephen J. Campbell, *Cosmè Tura of Ferrara: Style, Politics, and the Renaissance City, 1450-1495* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

This last fact in particular has left its mark on modern scholarship. The meaning of the *Mars and Venus*, the mood, even the subject matter have all been questioned at various points in what amounts to an extensive bibliography. My discussion of these ideas in the first section of this paper involves a critical reassessment of several notable interpretations of Mantegna's painting, one that is meant to be inclusive, but one that also probes the use and misuse of certain methodological paradigms. The most compelling interpretations focus on the scene's iconographic structure, specifically on the antitheses and complementary juxtapositions of the figures. However, the precise function of "antithesis" and the extent to which Mantegna exploited "antithesis" as a form of pictorial syntax are topics that deserve further consideration, topics that ultimately frame Mantegna's role in the creative dialogue among the artist, patron, and advisor.

Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* is an "essay" in *contrapposto*. *Contrapposto* can be seen in the poses of certain figures, in the way those figures are counter posed, and in the arrangement of hues, and these themes are present in all three parts of Alberti's *historia*. The analysis I offer in the second section of this paper focuses explicitly on the function and meaning of *contrapposto*, the way this concept links Mantegna's painting to theories of eloquence and the context of Isabella's *studiolo*.⁹ Mantegna's visual articulation of the

⁹ The literature on humanism and its relation to ancient rhetoric is extensive. For more information, My language here comes from Hanna H. Gray, "Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963): 497-514. see Jerrold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism: The Union of Eloquence and Wisdom, Petrarch to Valla* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); Richard A Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976); James J. Murphy, ed., *Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Peter Mack, ed., *Renaissance Rhetoric* (London: Macmillan, 1994); idem, *Renaissance Argument: Valla and Agricola in the Traditions of Rhetoric and Dialectic* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 2003); Stephen Gersh and Bert Roest, eds. *Medieval and Renaissance Humanism: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reform* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003); Heinrich F. Plett, *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004); Peter Mack, "Humanist Rhetoric and Dialectic" in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, Jill Kraye, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82-99.

Mars and Venus narrative frames the verbal exchange surrounding this image in the *marchesa's* chamber. His composition focuses the beholder's wit and intelligence on the virtuous character of Venus, the goddess of Beauty, and *la bella virtù* of Isabella d'Este. The art of reading the *Mars and Venus*, in other words, was a process that affected the beholder's understanding of Isabella as a patron, but it was also a process that shaped the viewer's understanding of Mantegna, the "*professore de anitquità*"¹⁰ as Isabella herself famously described him.

My goal is not new in that I am interested in interpreting Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* and exploring the significance that interpretation might hold for Isabella d'Este Gonzaga. However, I am also interested in taking up the banner of Sheryl Reiss and David Wilkins, in moving "beyond Isabella," to a certain extent, and exploring Mantegna's role in the creative process of this commission.¹¹ Isabella d'Este cannot be encapsulated in a study of any one instance of her patronage, but she is nevertheless present in this analysis in critical ways. The *Mars and Venus* is an image meant to engage Isabella on a personal level, particularly in terms of her horoscope and her influence on Mantuan "high culture." She provided the financial and conceptual impetus behind the painting's commission and undoubtedly took an active role in supervising the creative process. As her letters show, however, she delegates the task of inventing the literary programs for her paintings to a humanist advisor. The adviser then works in conjunction with the painter, who visually articulates the literary program. As such, I focus less on the

¹⁰ Clifford M. Brown, *Per dare qualche splendore a la gloriosa città di Mantua: Documents for the Antiquarian Collection of Isabella d'Este* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2002), 131.

¹¹ See, Sheryl E. Reiss and David G. Wilkins, eds., *Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2001).

marchesa's personality are more on her role as interlocutor, as a patron in dialogue with Mantegna and a humanist advisor, most likely Paride da Ceresara.

Affirming this division of labor, however, does not deny the artist's intellectual capacities.¹² Mantegna's use of *contrapposto* and the theoretical threads linking this pictorial motif to humanist stylistics suggest that the communication among the artist, patron, and advisor was an actual exchange of ideas. Here, Mantegna's pictorial composition is an expression of eloquence and erudition in its own right, another display of knowledge that not only engages the intellectual concerns of "*studiolo* culture" but that also engages Mantegna's intellectual legacy, his role in the revival of classical antiquity.

As with Isabella, no one instance of his work can adequately encapsulate Andrea Mantegna the historical character. A detailed investigation of Mantegna's career-long preoccupation with all forms of antiquity—from texts, to objects, to architecture—falls outside the purview of this paper. What the *Mars and Venus* does capture, however, and what I want to highlight, is an instance when Mantegna's textual knowledge and linguistic facilities are brought together with his archeological study of classical figures, a moment of harmony between two forms of this artist's classicism that are rarely discussed together.

This paper augments our understanding of Isabella and Mantegna, just as it was meant to augment the Quattrocento viewer's understanding of these figures and their

¹² See Rose Marie San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma: Isabella d'Este and Art Collecting in the Renaissance," *Oxford Art Journal* 41 (1991): 67-78. Cf. Charles Hope, "Artists, Patrons, and Advisers in the Italian Renaissance," in *Patronage in the Renaissance*, G.F. Lytle and S. Orgel, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 293-343; Norman E. Land, *The Viewer as Poet: The Renaissance Response to Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 101-127; and more recently Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). For the extensive bibliography on Isabella d'Este beyond what is cited in this paper, see Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, *La Prima Donna del Mondo: Isabella d'Este, Fürstin und Mäzenatin der Renaissance*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1994).

place in Mantuan society. By examining the *Mars and Venus* within the context of artistic practice, patronage, and “*studiolo* culture,” I hope to generate further discussion on these issues, as well as on the meaning of form and composition in other examples of Mantegna’s work. After all, “the great work of the painter,” according to Alberti, is “a *historia*.”¹³

I: *Rerum concordia discors*

The subject of Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus* comes from Homer’s *Odyssey*, specifically Book VIII, where Demodocus, Homer’s blind musician and poet, sings of the passion of Mars and Venus.¹⁴ Vulcan, with the help of Apollo, discovered their affair, and seeking to humiliate the lovers before the gods, trapped them in an elaborate net. However, when the gods assembled, Apollo, the god of poetry, turned to his brother Mercury, the god of eloquence:

“Tell me, Hermes, would you be willing to be pinched in chains if it meant you could lie side by side with golden Aphrodite?” And the quicksilver messenger shot back: “I tell you what, Apollo. Tie me up with three times as many unbreakable chains, and get all the gods and goddesses, too, to come here and look, if it means I can sleep side by side with golden Aphrodite.” The gods roared with laughter...¹⁵

What Mantegna represents, according to Edgar Wind, is essentially this humorous event. Mantegna depicts Mars and Venus standing in complementary poses atop a rocky arch. As a pair, they are psychologically isolated and set off formally by a wall of foliage, which provides a semi-private setting for their affair. The only figure that penetrates this

¹³ Alberti, II:§35.

¹⁴ Edgar Wind, *Bellini’s Feast of the Gods: A Study in Venetian Humanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 9-20.

¹⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000): VIII, 285-395, pp. 114-117. Quotation from page 116.

space is Cupid, but he does not engage the lovers. Instead, he directs his dart rearwards at Vulcan as the latter rages in his cave, preparing the net with which to enact his revenge. Mercury and Pegasus oversee the scene below. They are located on the right of the composition, closest to the viewer. In the middle ground, the Muses spread across the plane in a relief-like fashion, dancing to Apollo's lyre and celebrating the union of Mars and Venus.

For Wind, the frivolousness of the dancing Muses and Cupid's playful taunting vindicates the union of the god of war and the goddess of love as *rerum concordia discors*, "the discordant concord of things."¹⁶ Indeed, humor is an important aspect of this painting. Homer's story is a tale that involves wit and the mocking of cuckoldry, a pervasive subject of comedy in the Renaissance.¹⁷ The mood of Mantegna's painting is correspondingly playful. There are definite sexual innuendos and literary puns here. Venus is nude. She stands before a couch with her lover, Mars. The rabbits appearing in the foreground, animals commonly associated with Venus, invite the viewer to play the Latin "*cuniculus*" off the Latin word for the female pudenda, "*cunnus*."¹⁸ The *grappolo* hanging beside Vulcan's grotto functioned as a sign of contempt; *nuovo* or *dolce*

¹⁶ Horace, *Epistles* I, §12 in *Horace Epistles: Book I*, ed. Roland Mayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72; Wind, *Bellini's Feast of the Gods*, 9-20. Wind is adding to Richard Förster's discussion of mockery and humor. Although Wind rightly challenges Förster's conclusion that the painting is an allegory of vice, Förster's argument that Isabella's motivation for the commission was directly linked to Mantegna's reputation as an artist is quite compelling. See R. Förster, "Studien zu Mantegna und den Bildern im Studiennzimmer der Isabella Gonzaga," *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 22 (1901): 78-87; 154-180. Paul Barolsky provides a more recent discussion of the humor in Mantegna's painting in *Infinite Jest*, 33-37. Cf. E. Tietze-Conrat, "Mantegna's *Parnassus*: A Discussion of a Recent Interpretation," *The Art Bulletin* 31 (1949): 126-130; Edgar Wind, "Mantegna's *Parnassus*: A Reply to Some Recent Reflections," *The Art Bulletin* 31 (1949): 224-231; E. Tietze-Conrat, *Mantegna* (London: Phaidon Press, 1955); and idem, "Zur höfischen Allegorie der Renaissance," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 34 (1917): 78-180.

¹⁷ Barolsky, *Infinite Jest*, 35-46.

¹⁸ The pun between *cuniculus* and *cunnus* appears in Piero di Cosimo's *Mars and Venus* from ca. 1505. Barolsky, *Infinite Jest*, 45-46. See also, Wind, *Bellini's Feast of the Gods*, 9-13.

grappolo means “simpleton.”¹⁹ At some point in the painting’s history, a viewer seems to have noticed this characterization of Vulcan and made it more explicit, scratching a faint line from Cupid’s pipe to Vulcan’s groin.²⁰ While there is no way of knowing whether this happened in Isabella’s *studiolo* or at some later date, the image of a Mantuan courtier explaining the connection between the figure of “*Cupido*” and the “*cupiditas*” feeding Vulcan’s fury is tempting to consider.

Within the walls of Isabella’s *studiolo*, this type of literary wit was not only appreciated but perhaps even expected. Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus* was part of an environment dedicated to connoisseurship and reading, part of what Stephen Campbell calls “*studiolo* culture.” It was displayed in conjunction with a diverse collection of antiquities. Cicero, Horace, Ovid, Seneca, and Aristotle sat on shelves in the same room.²¹ As part of the *studiolo* setting, the painting was, to borrow from Campbell, an “active producer of cultural identity,”²² a tangible statement about Isabella’s knowledge and taste. In this sense, entertainment and humor functioned as mechanisms for serious social exchange. Cicero, to name one of the most important authors from the humanist’s perspective, captures this precise idea: “It is indeed clearly fitting for the orator to stir up laughter, either because cheerfulness by itself wins goodwill for the one who has excited

¹⁹ Tietze-Contrat, “Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” 127.

²⁰ Ernst Gombrich initially claimed that either Mantegna or someone else scratched the surface of the painting. Phyllis Lehmann maintains the line was originally inlaid with or painted in gold. This, however, seems incompatible with the visual character of Mantegna’s image, whereas Gombrich’s interpretation fits nicely with the discursive context of Isabella’s *studiolo*. E.H. Gombrich, “An Interpretation of Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 26 (1963): n. 9; Phyllis W. Lehmann, “The Sources and Meaning of Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” in *Samothracian Reflections, Aspects of the Revival of the Antique*, eds. P.W. Lehmann and K. Lehmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 65, 153-161.

²¹ For the contents of Isabella’s library, see Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 270-279.

²² Campbell, “Giorgione’s *Tempest*,” 304.

it, or because everyone admires cleverness (often a matter of just one word!)...”²³

Mantegna’s spectator was meant to witness both his and the *marchesa*’s cleverness, her “cultivated self,”²⁴ the “*liberale e magnanime Isabella*”²⁵ as Ariosto put it.

The *Mars and Venus* is a multivalent image, humorous, mocking, and frivolous—as Wind argues—on the surface, but as Ernst Gombrich has shown, it was a deep and profound allegory in essence. The painting combines an exegesis of Homer with a gloss on a classical commentary on Homer, attributed to Heraclitus Ponticus during the Quattrocento:

I think, however, that though this story [the affair of Mars and Venus] was sung among...a people enslaved by pleasure, it still contains a philosophical message. For the passage confirms...that Ares is the name of strife, Aphrodite that of love. Homer tells us how these two ancient enemies were reconciled. Thus it is fitting that from the two is born Harmony, which reduces everything to concord and tranquility.²⁶

For Gombrich, the presence of Mercury and Apollo is justified because their banter provoked the gods to laugh “and rejoice out of gratitude that the accursed strife is over and transformed into unanimity and peace.”²⁷ The Muses, however, prove more problematic, and Gombrich unfortunately ignores Pegasus altogether.²⁸

²³ Cicero, *De Oratore* II, §236 in *On the Ideal Orator*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 186. Henceforth, “Cicero.”

²⁴ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, specifically 29-41; idem., “Giorgione’s *Tempest*, *Studiolo* Culture, and the Renaissance Lucretius,” specifically 303; and, more generally, idem., “Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” 69-87. See also, Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study*; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*; and idem., “Possessing the Past,” where the authors argue that the possession and display of collectibles gave spatial expression to the private individual. Rose Marie San Juan presents a compelling reading of Isabella’s *studiolo*, the production of a “cultivated persona,” and the politics of gender at court in “The Court Lady’s Dilemma,” 67-78.

²⁵ Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, *second l’edizione del 1532 con le variant delle edizioni del 1516 e del 1521*, eds. Santorre Debenedetti and Cesare Segre (Bologna: Commissione Per i Testi di Lingua, 1960), xiii, 59. See also Lisa K. Regan, “Ariosto’s Threshold Patron: Isabella d’Este in the *Orlando Furioso*,” *MLN* 120 (2005): 50-69.

²⁶ Quoted in Gombrich, “An Interpretation of Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” 197.

²⁷ Quoted in Gombrich, “An Interpretation of Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” 197.

²⁸ While Gombrich finds no direct meaning for these figures, he does note a parallel between the iconography of Mantegna’s painting and the opening lines of Pontanus’s *Urania*, a contemporaneous poem concerned with the theme of Harmony. He clearly does not want to suggest a direct link between the

Both Wind and Gombrich present compelling arguments, but the disjunctions between Mantegna's painting and the textual sources complicate matters. Ultimately, what we need here is what Anthony Colantuono calls an "iconology of difference,"²⁹ a method of viewing the *Mars and Venus* that explores the continuities between text and image as well as the interruptions. This painting is an example of creative imitation.³⁰ Mantegna grounds his viewer in Homer and the commentaries, but he adapts the narrative to the specific context of Isabella's *studiolo*, to the ambivalence of "*studiolo* culture." According to Campbell, Isabella's collection of mythological paintings was a response to the tensions between the public and private functions of the space.³¹

The history of Isabella's *studiolo* seems to support this contextual reading. The room was initially rather modest. From 1491 to 1496, simple "*armj e divise*" of the Gonzaga family decorated the walls. In 1494, Isabella installed a tile floor displaying more Gonzaga *imprese*, furthering the extent to which her space promoted the House of

painting and the poem, but he maintains that the two evocations of divine Harmony are so close in conceptualization that they illuminate one another despite the fact that they were conceived independently. Gombrich, "An Interpretation of Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 197-198.

²⁹ Anthony Colantuono, "Tears of Amber: Titian's *Andrians*, the River Po and the Iconology of Difference," in *Phaethon's Children: The Este Court and its Culture in Early Modern Ferrara*, ed. D. Lonney (Tempe AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2005), 225-252.

³⁰ For general but insightful information on theories of imitation in the Renaissance see Alina Payne, Ann Kuttner, Rebekah Smick, eds., *Antiquity and Its Interpreters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Martin L. McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Jean-Claude Carron, "Imitation and Intertextuality in the Renaissance," *New Literary History* 19 (1988): 565-579; Thomas M. Green, *The Light of Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982); Howard Mayer Brown, "Emulation, Competition, and Homage: Imitation and Theories of Imitation in the Renaissance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35 (1982): 1-48; G.W. Pigman III, "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 33 (1980): 1-32; Martin Kemp, "From *Mimesis* to *Fantasia*: The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration, and Genius in the Visual Arts," *Viator* 7 (1977): 347-398; Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), specifically 683-744; Izora Scott, *Controversies over the Imitation of Cicero as Model of Style and Some Phases of their Influence on the Schools of the Renaissance* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1910), 3-41.

³¹ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 27-113 and note 6 above.

Gonzaga.³² The year 1495, however, marks a critical juncture. While she was visiting Ferrara, Isabella wrote to her secretary Capilupus, inquiring about the measurements and layout of her rooms. Capilupus responded the following day, outlining the dimensions and providing a sketch. That Isabella had this information sent to Ferrara suggests that she made the decision to reorganize her *studiolo* while she was in the company of Ferrarese scholars.³³

Shortly after returning to Mantua, Isabella shifted her collecting patterns.³⁴ From 1490 to 1496, her letters focus on the acquisition of antique *intaglio* and contemporary gems. Documents concerning more prestigious collectibles, such as bronze and marble

³² In a letter dating to 6 November 1491, Isabella informs the painter Liombeni that she will have him arrested if she does not find her *studiolo* complete on her return. Liombeni's reply, dated to 8 November, is apologetic and asks for specific instructions regarding the images Isabella commissioned from him earlier that year. Calandra, Isabella's secretary in Mantua, wrote a letter (10 November 1491) reiterating Liombeni's request for further instructions. Isabella replied on 12 November. This letter discusses the five *divise* and instructs Liombeni to paint two on the long walls and the fifth on the small walls of her room. Verheyen outlines this exchange in *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este at Mantua* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 9-10, n. 15, but he was unable to read Isabella's list of images. Clifford Brown translates the devises as the maize (*mellege*), trave (*travaglio*), plume (*penarola*), stirrups (*staffe*), and halter (*cavedon*). Clifford M. Brown, "The Grotta of Isabella d'Este," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 89 (1977): 155-171. Molly Bourne translates *cavedon* as "andiron" rather than "halter." Molly Bourne, "Renaissance Husbands and Wives as Patrons of Art: The *Camerini* of Isabella d'Este and Francesco II Gonzaga," in *Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy*, eds. S.E. Reiss and D.G. Wilkins (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2001), 96. For Isabella's letters, see Alessandro Luzio, *I Precettori di Isabella d'Este* (Ancona, 1887), 18-19.

Isabella's tiled floor served both aesthetic and practical functions. Francesco actually commissioned the tiles to decorate the floor in his countryside villa at Marmiolo. Isabella used what was left over from the project to solve the recurring mice problem in her *studiolo*. Molly Bourne maintains that Isabella oriented the early decorative program of her chamber towards Gonzaga imagery, but that as time went on and Isabella's position in Mantua became more secure, the imagery became more personal. This paper's concern is more limited, but it is nevertheless important to note that Gonzaga imagery was an essential part of the room's decoration in the Castello di San Giogrio, and the presence to two paintings by Mantegna, the Gonzaga court artist, further reinforced this agenda. Bourne, *Renaissance Husbands and Wives as Patrons of Art*, 93-124. Cf. J.V.G. Mallet, "Tiled Floors and Court Designers in Mantua and Northern Italy," in *The Court of the Gonzaga in the Age of Mantegna: 1450-1550*, eds. Cesare Mozzarelli, Robert Oresko, and Leandro Ventura (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1997), 253-273. See also, Giuseppe Gerola, "Transmigrazioni e vicende dei camerini di Isabella d'Este," *Arti e Memorie della R. Accademia Virgiliana* 21 (1929): 253-290.

³³ Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*, 11. Capilupus's reply to Isabella's request is preserved in the Archivio di Stato, Mantua. Unfortunately, Isabella letter and Capilupus's sketch are lost. *Ibid.* n. 23. See also, Jaynie Anderson, "What was Ferrarese about Isabella d'Este's *Camerino*?" in *The Court of the Gonzaga in the Age of Mantegna*, 337-352.

³⁴ See Brown, *Per dara qualche splendore*, 117-183.

sculptures, appear only at the beginning of 1498, when Isabella thanks Ludovico Angelli for a “*brazo de una figura de bronzo antiquo...per ornare uno studio principiato.*”³⁵ It is around this time, in 1496, that Isabella began to renovate her *studiolo* and develop a new decorative program. In November of that year, Alberto da Bologna sent the *marchesa* word of Giovanni Bellini’s willingness to contribute a work to her *studiolo*. In the Spring of 1497, Isabella orders Lorenzo da Pavia to enter into negotiations with Perugino, should the rumors regarding the artist’s death prove false. On 6 June, 1497, and again on 14 June, Lorenzo is asked to purchase varnish for Mantegna. Almost a month later, on 3 July 1497, Isabella—who is once again in Ferrara—receives word from Alberto da Bologna that the *pedestalli* above Mantegna’s painting would be in place by the time she returns.³⁶

Alberto’s letter is the first direct reference to one of Mantegna’s paintings *in situ*, but it only discusses the installation of “*el quadro de Messer Andrea.*”³⁷ Mantegna’s second painting, his *Minerva*, does not appear on record until 1502, when Isabella again

³⁵ Quoted in C. Malcolm Brown, “‘*Lo Insaziabile Desiderio Nostro de Cose Antiquo*’: New Documents on Isabella d’Este’s Collection of Antiquities,” in *Cultural Aspects of The Italian Renaissance: Essays in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed C. Clough (New York: Manchester University Press, 1976), 331.

³⁶ Neither of Isabella’s initial efforts to acquire a painting from Bellini and Perugino proved successful. Alessandro Luzio originally published Alberto da Bologna’s letter concerning Giovanni Bellini in “Disegni topografici e pitture dei Bellini,” *Archivio Storico dell’Arte* 1 (1888): 277. It has since been republished by Charles Yriarte, “Isabella d’Este et les artistes de son temps,” *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 13 (1895): 216-217; Jennifer Fletcher, “Isabella d’Este and Giovanni Bellini’s *Presepio*,” *Burlington Magazine* 113 (1971): 703; Clifford M. Brown and Anna Maria Lorenzoni, *Isabella d’Este and Lorenzo da Pavia: Documents for the History of Art and Culture in Renaissance Mantua* (Geneva: Droz, 1982), 157. Lorenzo da Pavia’s negotiations with Perugino can be found in *ibid.*, 42-43. For Alberto da Bologna’s letter concerning the installation of Mantegna’s painting, see Clifford M. Brown, “New Documents concerning Andrea Mantegna and a Note regarding ‘Jeronimus de Conradis pictor’,” *The Burlington Magazine* 111 (1969): 541; Brown and Lorenzoni, *Isabella d’Este and Lorenzo da Pavia*, 44.

³⁷ Mantegna’s name first appears in a letter dated 4 March 1492, where Calandra informs the *marchesa* of Mantegna’s offer to contribute a painting to her *studiolo*. But this letter is not a reference to Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus* or *Minerva*. Isabella made no plans regarding mythological paintings until at least 1495. As Egon Verheyen rightly argues, Mantegna’s offer is most likely an attempt to gain Isabella’s patronage, a gesture motivated by the *marchesa*’s natural sympathies for Ferrarese artists. Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este*, 10-12, n. 24. Some scholars regrettably ignore Verheyen’s observation. See, in particular, Jones, “‘What Venus Did with Mars,’” 198.

orders Lorenzo da Pavia to purchase varnish for the artist, the same quality as that provided for “*l’altro quadro*.”³⁸ Fiera’s poem, dating to late 1498 or early 1499, confirms that the *Mars and Venus* is the earlier work. This painting is thus the only extant example of Isabella’s original mythological program, a program intended to engage her newly acquired, intellectually stimulating objects, antiquities meant to effectively blend the world of ideas with the world of commodities and cultural politics.³⁹

The question Campbell poses in *The Cabinet of Eros* is thus a crucial one. “What, then, were these paintings for?”⁴⁰ Isabella’s mythologies were not luxury goods in the same sense as the antique gems, vases, and statues in her collection. The paintings, Campbell maintains, transformed Isabella’s antiquities into objects of knowledge. Mythological images were capable of sustaining poetic acts of interpretation, interpretations that linked the collectibles to intertextual forms of reading, enabling Isabella’s antiquities to “embody knowledge.”⁴¹

To make Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus* the link between Isabella’s books and collectibles, however, privileges the painting at the expense of the antiquities—or more accurately, privileges the painting without regard for the expense of the antiquities, which

³⁸ Brown, “New Documents concerning Andrea Mantegna,” 542; Brown and Lorenzoni, *Isabella d’Este and Lorenzo da Pavia*, 66. There is an unfortunate tendency among scholars to discuss the *Minerva* as a pendant to the *Mars and Venus*. Verheyen goes as far as to argue that Mantegna completed these two paintings at roughly the same time and that scholars can only talk about them together. Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este*, 9, n.14. Documents, however, tell a different story. The *Mars and Venus* hung alone for several years. It can and should be discussed as an individual work of art. An analysis of Mantegna’s *Minerva*, therefore, falls outside the purview of the present paper.

³⁹ Isabella’s collection actually occupied two rooms in the Castello di San Giorgio, the *studiolo* or *studio* and the *grotta*. According to Stivini’s inventory, the *grotta* housed the majority of the *marchesa*’s collection, which at the time of Isabella’s death comprised 1620 objects. As Clifford Brown notes, however, there is no evidence that Isabella put the *grotta* to practical use until 1508. Mantegna’s painting, then, potentially stood beside the entirety of Isabella’s collection for over ten years. Brown, “*Lo Insaziabile Desiderio*,” 331. For a detailed discussion and transcription of the Inventory, see Brown, *Per dare qualche splendore*, 319-356. See also Andrew Martindale, “The Patronage of Isabella d’Este at Mantua,” *Apollo* 79 (1964): 183-191

⁴⁰ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 46.

⁴¹ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 46.

were Isabella's true focus and from a purely economic standpoint, the more precious commodity.⁴² In the Renaissance, moreover, ancient coins, gems, and sculptural fragments were aspects of the past worthy of careful consideration in and of themselves. For those individuals—artists, humanists, and patrons—who belonged to the culture of antiquarianism, ancient artifacts carried an inherent intellectual value.⁴³

Filarete's description of Piero de' Medici's *studiolo* is a case in point.

[Piero] has himself carried into a studio... When he arrives there, he looks at his books. They seem like nothing but solid pieces of gold. [...] He has honored them, as you have understood, with fine script, miniatures, and ornaments of gold and silk, as a man who recognizes the dignity of their authors and through love of them has wished to honor them in this manner. The following day, according to what I was told, he has effigies and portraits of all the emperors and noble men who have ever lived made in gold, silver, bronze, jewels, marble, or other materials. [...] *These give pleasure in two ways to anyone who understands and enjoys them as he does*: first, for the excellence of the image represented, second for the noble mastery of those ancient angelic spirits who with their sublime intellects made such ordinary things as bronze, marble and such materials acquire great price. [...] He takes pleasure and delight in looking at them *and in talking about the intrinsic virtue and value of those he has* [...] In short, worthy and magnanimous man that he is, of many virtues and polite accomplishments, he delights in every worthy and strange thing and does not note the expense.⁴⁴

In this passage, Filarete uses the humanist ideal of reading to create a new sense of value for Piero's collectibles. In the final sentence quoted above, the author makes an important distinction between worth ("*degnie*") and expense ("*spesa*"). The latter refers to a raw monetary figure, while the former carries a deeper moral meaning, one that is ascribed to the objects, "every worthy and strange thing," and to the owner of the *studiolo*, "worthy and magnanimous man that he is."

⁴² Martindale, "The Patronage of Isabella d'Este," 183-191.

⁴³ Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13 (1950): 285-315; Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969); Findlen, "Possessing the Past," 95. See also, Patricia Fortini Brown, *Venice and Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Filarete, *Treatise on Architecture*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), I: 318-319. My italics. This passage is quoted as well in Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 29-30.

This, Campbell rightly points out, is something more complex than self-fashioning; it is “self-cultivation.” The *studiolo* is “representational space,”⁴⁵ a space where the coupling of books and objects gives tangible form to the owner’s wealth and more importantly his or her worth. It was because of Piero’s erudition that he was able to understand the true significance, intrinsic value, and virtue of his collectibles. The Medici prince read first, then, “the following day,” he examined his antiquities. As a result, he could appreciate them in two ways, as examples of skillful craftsmanship and as expressions of the human intellect. Paintings, however, are notably absent from the discussion.

Isabella’s *studiolo*—like that Piero de’ Medici—made a statement about her taste and sophistication. The coupling of objects and texts was more than a simple display of wealth; it was a display of worth, something that could not be adequately measured in terms of material cost. The books and objects in her *studiolo* implied that she too appreciated her collectibles as examples of skillful craftsmanship and human artistry. Isabella’s antiquities were meant to be understood as “virtuous riches.”⁴⁶ However, this implication—as Campbell again rightly points out—stood in opposition to a vein of humanist thought that viewed material objects as immoral distractions. Leon Battista Alberti, to cite an important thinker with ties to the Gonzaga court, effectively captures this tension. “He who wants to make his soul more splendid,” Alberti states, “must certainly despise, hate, and abhor those sordid things called pleasures, as well as those enemies of the virtues, luxury and riches...Not least among these are amorous pleasures,

⁴⁵ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 34.

⁴⁶ Paolo Manuzio, Letter to Andrea Loredan, 1522, *Lettere volgari* (Venice) 72r-v; Campbell, “Giorgione’s *Tempest*,” 303. See also Monica Schmitter, “‘Virtuous Riches’: The Bricolage of *Cittadini* Identities in Early-Sixteenth-Century Venice,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 57 (2004): 908-969.

the desire for which is absolutely foreign to the studious.”⁴⁷ Luxury, riches, and amorous pleasures may have been foreign to the studious, in Alberti’s mind, but they were part and parcel of Isabella’s *studiolo*.⁴⁸

“Ambivalence” is an important word for Campbell and his concept of “*studiolo* culture,” one that does captures the context surrounding Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus*.⁴⁹ But it is important to understand that “ambivalence” describes the conflict between two possible interpretations of Isabella’s antiquities that are independent of her mythological paintings. A tradition of thought stretching from Aristotle to Ariosto could justify the *marchesa*’s opulence as “magnificence,” but an equally powerful set of ideas called that same opulence into question. As “personal space,” a public expression of the private individual, the questions regarding the moral character of her *studiolo* had ramifications for Isabella’s reputation, ramifications that became even more pressing in light of the confines of gender at court.

Isabella’s *studiolo*, and the prominent collection of ancient artifacts it housed, gave her a more pronounced visibility in Mantuan society, allowing her to occupy spaces traditionally reserved for male members of the court. But there was a trade off. This chamber, as Rose Marie San Juan has convincingly shown, threatened the *marchesa*’s

⁴⁷ Leon Battista Alberti, *De commodis litterarum atque incommodes* (c. 1428), quoted and translated in Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 36. See also *ibid.*, 29-38, 87-113.

⁴⁸ Two particularly insightful examples of “amorous pleasures” in Isabella’s collection are the famous *Sleeping Cupids*, one by Michelangelo and other attributed to Praxiteles during the Quattrocento. Isabella began pursuing the antique *Cupid* as early as 1498. She redoubled her efforts in 1502, after she acquired the Michelangelo in July of that year. It was not until 1505, however, that she finally gained possession of the “Praxiteles.” Isabella began pursuing a third *Sleeping Cupid* in 1506. By 1627 the ducal collection contained no less than four *Sleeping Cupids*. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 91-102; Ruth Rubinstein, “Michelangelo’s Lost *Sleeping Cupid* and Fetti’s *Vertumnus and Pomona*” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 49 (1986): 257-259; Paul F. Norton, “The Lost *Sleeping Cupid* of Michelangelo,” *The Art Bulletin* 39 (1957): 251-257.

⁴⁹ Campbell, “Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” 69-87; *idem.*, *The Cabinet of Eros*; see also *idem.*, “Giorgione’s *Tempest*,” 299-332.

femininity and virtue.⁵⁰ The conspicuous presence that accompanied the possession of a *studiolo*, the bold statement it made about Isabella's "self," disrupted the delicate balance required of the "Court Lady."⁵¹ According to Castiglione, the ideal princess was to have

serene and modest manners, and to that comeliness that ought to inform all her actions, a quick vivacity of spirit whereby she will show herself a stranger to all boorishness; but with such a kind manner as to cause her to be thought no less chaste, prudent, and gentle than she is agreeable, witty, and discreet: thus she must observe a certain mean (difficult to achieve and as it were, *composed of contraries*) and must strictly observe certain limits and not exceed them.⁵²

The "Court Lady" had to be conspicuously inconspicuous, "circumspect, and more careful [than the Courtier] not to give occasion for evil being said of her...for a woman has not so many ways of defending herself against false calumnies as a man has."⁵³ The audacity of Isabella's *studiolo*, however, complicated the *rerum concordia discors* that formed the ideal character for someone in her position. Isabella gave her cultivated self a conspicuous, bold spatial dynamic, a material presence that engaged the humanist and court communities, but that also exceeded the limits of modest decorum. By redefining

⁵⁰ San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma," 67-78. Cf. Julia Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua (1474-1539): A Study of the Renaissance* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1903); Martindale, "The Patronage of Isabella d'Este," 183-191; J.M. Fletcher, "Isabella d'Este, Patron and Collector" in *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, D.S. Chambers and J. Martineau, eds. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1981), 51-63; Hope, "Artists, Patrons, and Advisers in the Italian Renaissance," 293-343; Stephen Kolsky, "Images of Isabella d'Este," *Italian Studies* 34 (1984):47-62.

⁵¹ I follow San Juan in my use of the term "Court Lady," referring to the ideal standards of feminine behavior at court during the Renaissance. While Castiglione's codification of this ideal in the *The Book of the Courtier* postdates Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* by more than ten years, it is nevertheless an important concept for the circumstances we are describing. Castiglione did after all codify the ideal. He did not invent it. Moreover, Castiglione's vivid portrayal of the ideal Renaissance court stems from his experiences in a social circle that he shared with Isabella d'Este. Castiglione wrote his book while he was in the service of Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, from 1508 to 1524. Throughout this book, Elisabetta Gonzaga, Isabella's sister-in-law, represents the ideal "Court Lady." Before Castiglione entered the service of the Urbino court, he resided in Milan, at the court of Lodovico Sforza and Beatrice d'Este, Isabella's younger sister. In 1499, Castiglione left Milan, and returned to his place of birth, Casatico, in the territory of Mantua. There he became affiliated with the Gonzaga court, which he continued to serve until he left for Urbino.

⁵² Baldessare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), III: v, 207; quoted in San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma," 71-72. My italics.

⁵³ Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, III: iv, 206.

the limits of her gender, then, Isabella invited questions regarding her reputation for chastity.⁵⁴

In this regard, we begin to see the severity of Fiera's misreading of Mantegna's painting. By fitting Isabella into the narrative as the figure of Venus, by turning Venus into a representation of Isabella, Fiera did not just call the *marchesa's* chastity into question; his poem basically made an accusation. These tensions were real and as Fiera shows potentially scandalous. What then is this painting for?

Essentially, the act, or the art of interpreting Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* reconciled these tensions. As San Juan argued, the painting provided a "way out" of the "Court Lady's Dilemma." San Juan, however, seizes on the "very ambiguity" of Mantegna's painting, arguing that it led to something like Fiera's poem on the one hand, while incited other courtiers to come to Isabella's defense on the other.⁵⁵ Campbell follows a similar line of reasoning, arguing that the *Mars and Venus* is a "fable about fables," a representation of ancient myth that—in its inherent ambiguity—empowers the viewer to determine the nature of ancient myth in general. Each iconographic character, he maintains, corresponds to a network of possible textual associations, a network that continually multiplies as each new figure is considered. Ultimately, when confronted with an image such as this, the viewer is obliged to consider many different but equally valid interpretations, to consider that this manner of consideration, this interpretive pluralism, might well be Mantegna's point.⁵⁶

Campbell's reading hinges on the cluster of black and white grapes hanging beside Vulcan's grotto. He links this motif not to a literary pun but to Pliny's *Natural*

⁵⁴ San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma," 67-78.

⁵⁵ San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma," 73.

⁵⁶ See Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 124; idem., "Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 71-74.

History, and Pliny thus becomes an authoritative source for the various interests pertaining to the *studiolo* as a space of study. The discussion of virtue, which played such an important role in Campbell's analysis of Isabella's *studiolo* in general, gives way to a discussion of Lucianic irony and natural philosophy.⁵⁷ Mantegna's painting is about the creativity of nature, which finds expression through the artist's interest in geological description, the commingling of the four elements in Vulcan's smithy, and the spring that teems with life and natural wonders.⁵⁸ Ultimately, however, natural creativity is set against the adulterous affair of Mars and Venus, and this thematic pairing is juxtaposed with the divinities of poetry and the "pure" Muses, rupturing the painting's conceptual structure with layers of ironic tension.⁵⁹ Mantegna's juxtaposition of poetic celebration and joyous mockery with divine adultery and revenge does not point to a deeper philosophical message, as Gombrich maintained, but rather constitutes a Lucianic attitude of philosophical suspicion. Irony, which is different from Wind's "spirit of mockery," works as a distancing device, separating the Renaissance viewer from the classical past, producing what Campbell calls a "cultural remoteness."⁶⁰

This is not to say that the *Mars and Venus* is completely illegible. For Campbell, Mantegna's canvas comprises various motifs related to the origins of poetry, poetic myth and eloquence, several "primordial *fonts*" or figures of the "return to the source." The presence of the Hippocrene spring and the Muses, together with the fertile creativity of nature as the original artificer, suggest to Campbell that we are looking at the original

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the significance of natural philosophy in the *studiolo* of Alfonso d'Este, see Anthony Colantuono, "*Dies Alcyoniae*: The Invention of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*," *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 237-256.

⁵⁸ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 136. See also, Andreas Hauser, "Andrea Mantegna's 'Parnass': Ein Programmbild orphischen K nstlertums," *Pantheon* 58 (2000): 23.

⁵⁹ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 133-138; idem., "Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 74.

⁶⁰ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 122-124.

forma of poetic invention.⁶¹ But the tension of these motifs in juxtaposition to one another results in an open-ended dilemma. The idealization of Venus and Mars set against their foreshadowed punishment and implicit adultery; the juxtaposition of this story with poetic celebration; the commingling of “chaste” and “fertile” origins of poetic myth—these are thematic groupings that Campbell sees as embodying the conflicting relationship between the Renaissance and antiquity in general. Mantegna leaves the viewer suspended in a state of ambiguity and ambivalence. It is the viewer who resolves this conflict, who relates his or her present to the Classical past, and it is the viewer who decides the nature of that relationship, a relationship that is always subjective. Mantegna, his advisor, and Isabella merely ask the question.⁶²

The problem with this account is twofold, part historical and part historiographic. According to Campbell, Lucian finds his way into Mantegna’s work through the writings of Alberti.⁶³ The connection between Mantegna and Alberti is appropriate, especially given “the palpable presence of *composition*”⁶⁴ in the *Mars and Venus*. But the connection among Lucianic irony, Alberti’s *De Pictura*, and Mantegna’s canvas is less convincing. “Composition” is an aspect of art theory that links Mantegna to Alberti and Alberti to Cicero—and to a lesser extent Quintilian.⁶⁵ As this suggests, neither Mantegna

⁶¹ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 130; idem., “Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” 74.

⁶² Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 117-144; idem., “Mantegna’s *Parnassus*,” 79-81.

⁶³ Campbell cites Alberti’s retelling of Lucian’s story of Apelles *Calumny*, arguing that it afforded Renaissance art theorists and humanists a way of thinking about myth as a mode of invention that engaged the wit of the reader and viewer without inviting “facile allegoresis.” Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 122.

⁶⁴ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 118.

⁶⁵ Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 121-139. Cf. Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting, 1400-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), where the author rejects Baxandall’s reading of a visual-verbal analogy in Alberti’s theory. Jack Greenstein argues that Alberti’s *historia* “is about something far more important, pervasive, and profound than style as it is understood by Baxandall. It places Alberti’s rule of composition in the context of late medieval and early Renaissance theories on the role of vision in providing knowledge of the material world.” Jack M. Greenstein, “On Alberti’s ‘Sign’: Vision and Composition in Quattrocento Painting,” *The Art Bulletin* 79 (1997): 670. See also, idem., *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative*, 34-58. Anthony Grafton

nor Alberti were at all interested in positing a cultural disconnect. If anything, their sympathies lay with the belief that the humanist system of reading and writing allowed fifteenth-century Italians to engage the ancient world. Indeed, the entire practice of the *studia humanitatis* was predicated on a distinct sense of cultural empathy, the notion that by taking the ancients as models for careful study, close reading, and stylistic imitation, the distance between Classical past and Renaissance present could be circumvented.⁶⁶

When Isabella referred to Mantegna as a “*professore de antiquità*” in 1498, she was placing him in this specific intellectual context. As rhetorical as this statement may have been, it was nevertheless appropriate given the extent to which Mantegna actively took

responds to Greenstein in “*Historia and Istorica: Alberti’s Terminology in Context*,” *I Tatti Studies: Essays in the Renaissance* 8 (1999): 37-68. Charles Hope and Elizabeth McGrath are also critical of Baxandall to an extent, arguing that Alberti’s theories did not have a major impact on the artistic community, Mantegna included. Charles Hope and Elizabeth McGrath, “Artists and Humanists,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Humanism*, 161-188, specifically, 161-170. The analysis I offer below does not address this debate directly, but in my reading of Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus*, I look to align myself with Baxandall and present further evidence for his arguments by exploring the connections between Mantegna’s composition, ancient rhetoric, and Alberti’s *De Pictura*.

⁶⁶ The literature concerning Renaissance humanism and its relation to classical antiquity is far too dense to be given due attention at this point. I would, however, like to highlight a certain, somewhat related instance where scholars discuss this issue in a clear and insightful manner. Petrarch’s *The Secret* is widely regarded as a “humanist manifesto.” In the dialogues between Franciscus and Augustinus, we can plainly see the author’s intent to develop a practice of writing and reading that would bridge the gap between the fourteenth century and the ancient past. Petrarch’s *The Secret* imitates the ancient writing formula of “dialogue,” demonstrates a classical approach to ethics, and argues for the redemptive power of reading, of prudent reading, of reading in “the right way.” Virgil’s words, for instance, stimulate an awareness of death. Seneca provides a means to articulate one’s intellectual convictions. Moral conviction should be expressed in the words of Cicero. Carol E. Quillen, “Introduction: Petrarch’s *Secret* and Renaissance Humanism,” in Francesco Petrarch, *The Secret with Related Documents*, ed. C.E. Quillen (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 1-41; see also Meredith J. Gill, *Augustine in the Renaissance: Art and Philosophy from Petrarch to Michelangelo* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 94-124. Like Petrarch’s *The Secret*, imitation is central to Mantegna *Mars and Venus*, where Cicero’s writing provides a formula for composing statements about moral conviction. Additionally, one of the *marchesa*’s most prized books was a 1501 edition of Petrarch’s *Cose volgari*, printed from Petrarch’s original manuscript owned by Pietro Bembo. Findlen, “Possessing the Past,” 104-106; Cartwright, *Isabella d’Este*, II: 21. For further information of Petrarch and Humanism, see Ronald Witt, “Petrarch and Pre-Petrarchan Humanism: Stylistic Imitation and the Origins of Italian Humanism,” in *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation: Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus*, J.W. O’Malley, T.M. Izbicki, G. Christianson, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 73-100. For a general discussion of Petrarch’s influence in the Renaissance, see Karl A.E. Emenkel and Jan Papy, eds., *Petrarch and His Readers in the Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

hold of antiquity, directly and deeply, in a way inextricably linked to the formal structure of the *Mars and Venus*.

The more pressing issue with Campbell's interpretation, however, concerns his critique of iconographic analysis. "How," he asks, "is allegorical interpretation possible, when the particular mythic elements presented for interpretation have accumulated so many multifaceted and contradictory reworkings through literary tradition and humanist exegesis?"⁶⁷ Here, Campbell is setting himself against the legacy of iconology, attempting to take iconographic method in new directions by rejecting the "impulse to closure characteristic of iconographic studies."⁶⁸ Campbell continues to ask the same essential question that someone like Erwin Panofsky would bring to this image: What is represented? He continues to view Mantegna's figures as symbols, visual signs. The difference between Campbell's intertextual hermeneutics and traditional iconographic method is the way that question is answered, the way the signs are interpreted. For Campbell the relationship between signifier and referent is constantly shifting. Mantegna's figures are part of a fluid, almost arbitrary system of significance that forces the viewer to consider multiple, equally valid interpretations.⁶⁹ However, this methodological paradigm, this manner of methodically fragmenting the picture, is based more in contemporary theory, in branches of what we commonly refer to as "post-structuralism," than in the historical circumstances of late fifteenth-century Mantua.

⁶⁷ Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 121.

⁶⁸ Campbell, "Giorgione's *Tempest*," 299.

⁶⁹ For more information on similar methodological issues, see Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 174-208. Reva Wolf, Francis H. Dowley, Mieke Bal, Norman Bryson, "Some Thoughts on 'Semiotics and Art History'," *The Art Bulletin* 74 (1992): 522-531; Marie Czach, "Further on 'Semiotics and Art History'," *The Art Bulletin* 75 (1993): 338-340. Cf. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 3-31. More recently, see Colantuono, "Tears of Amber," 225-228; idem, "*Dies Alcyoniae*," especially 238-241; idem, *Titian, Colonna, and the Renaissance Science of Procreation*, forthcoming.

Isabella's own letters paint a different picture. In the famous program she sent to Perugino, Isabella refers to the commission as, "*La poetica nostra inventione, la quale grandemente desidero da voi essere dipinita*"; "Our poetic invention, which we greatly want to see you paint."⁷⁰ She maintains a firm sense of control, in other words, and more importantly, she takes ownership over the imagery and its meaning. The essential part of the invention reads,

Our poetic invention, which we greatly want to see you paint, is the Battle of Love and Chastity, that is to say, Pallas and Diana fighting against Venus and Cupid. Pallas must appear to have almost vanquished Cupid. After breaking his golden arrow and silver bow, and flinging them under her feet, she holds the blindfolded boy with one hand by the veil which he wears over his eyes, and lifts her lance to strike him with the other. The issue of the conflict between Diana and Venus must appear more doubtful. Venus's crown, garland, and veil will only have been slightly damaged, while Diana's raiment will have been singed by the torch of Venus, but neither of the Goddesses will have received any wounds.⁷¹

Isabella, her advisor Paride da Ceresar, and Perugino are concerned with the actions of the figures, with the narrative, the event to be depicted. The question with Perugino's *Battle of Love and Chastity*—and Mantegna's *Mars and Venus*—is not only, What is represented? The more important questions are, What is happening? How do the figures relate to one another within the narrative structure? The meaning of Mantegna's painting

⁷⁰ Quoted and translated in Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*, 26 and Hope, "Artists, Patrons, and Advisors in the Italian Renaissance," 293-294. See also, F. Canuti, *Il Perugino*, 2 vols. (Siena: La Diana, 1931), II: 212-213; D.S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), 136ff.

⁷¹ Isabella's letter to Perugino concludes, "I am sending you all these details in a small drawing, so that with both the written description and the drawing you will be able to consider my wishes in this matter. But if you think that perhaps there are too many figures in this for one picture, it is left to you to reduce them as you please, provided that you do not remove the principle basis, which consists of the four figures of Pallas, Diana, Venus, and Cupid. If no inconvenience occurs I shall consider myself well satisfied; you are free to reduce them, but not to add anything else. Please be content with this arrangement." The entire document is reproduced in Fiorenzo Canuti, *Il Perugino*, 208-237; Hope, "Artists, Patrons, and Advisors in the Italian Renaissance," 293-294; Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*, 26.

is greater than the sum of its parts. For as John Shearman reminds us, “it is in *what is happening* that the deeper meaning lies.”⁷²

One can be sure that Isabella d’Este and her guests would have discussed the ancient world and that this discussion was indeed integral to the function of Mantegna’s painting—Battista Fiera seems to make that rather clear. But Isabella and the scholars who designed her *studiolo* intended to direct the conversation. Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus* was not only capable of sustaining poetic acts of interpretation, it was first and foremost a poetic invention in its own right, an imitation of Homer’s story that imposed certain limits on the viewer’s imagination. As Isabella’s own letters suggest, and as certain scholars, notably Antony Colantuono, have convincingly argued, within the walls of the Renaissance *studiolo*, an *invenzione* carried a meaning that was direct, controlled, and absolute.

Mantegna’s *Mars and Venus* is a multivalent image, but—as Meredith Gill once said to me—“there is an important difference between multivalence and ambivalence,” between the enigmatic and the ambiguous. The *Mars and Venus* begs to be read, “read” in Shearman’s sense of the word, read as a *compositio*, “that procedure in painting whereby the parts are composed together in a picture”⁷³ The connection between word and image, here, is tangible, structural. Mantegna imitates the ancients, giving visual form to the rhetorical structure of antithesis and engaging the oratorical theories of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. His use of *contrapposto* is the pursuit of pictorial eloquence, a visual manifestation of the periodic syntax favored in humanist Latin. Ultimately, it constitutes an attempt to reconcile the tensions of *studiolo* culture, an

⁷² John Shearman, *Only Connect...Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 16.

⁷³ Alberti, II: §33.

appeal to what Hanna Gray called “the bond which united humanists, no matter how far separate in outlook or in time.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Gray, “Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence,” 497.

II: The “*profesore de antiquità*”

“This, then, must be the first rule I give to the prospective orator: I will show him whom he should imitate.”⁷⁵ By imitation, Cicero is referring to an essential stage of the orator’s training where the student adopts the mannerisms and style of an older model, but he is careful to distinguish between imitation and the simple act of copying. “Anyone who is going to do things properly must, first, be very careful in making his choice; and he must also devote all his attention to attaining those qualities of his approved model that are truly outstanding.”⁷⁶ Imitation, then, involves the faculty of judgment.

In *De inventione*, Cicero goes into more detail. He advises the orator to take the best aspects from several sources and assemble them into a perfect whole. He illustrates this idea with the tale of Zeuxis, who found the ideal of feminine beauty in a combination of features from five separate models. Fifteenth-century art theorists were quick to exploit this metaphor as a means to elevate the visual arts.⁷⁷ Alberti—following Cicero—also used Zeuxis as an example of appropriate artistic practice. According to Alberti, the artist is to survey nature, “to take everything from Nature,” and to “echo Nature,” but—in a statement that evokes Cicero’s lines quoted above—the artist is to “always choose those things that are most beautiful and worthy.”⁷⁸ The faculties of perception find the ideal of beauty in the world of experience, fragmented and fractured. The faculty of judgment, the discerning eye, enables the painter to confect this ideal in art.⁷⁹ To capture beauty in

⁷⁵ Cicero, II: §90.

⁷⁶ Cicero, II: §92.

⁷⁷ Cicero, *De inventione*, II: i, 1-3; John R. Spencer, “Ut Rhetorica Pictura: A Study in Quattrocento Theory of Painting,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 20 (1957): 26-44.

⁷⁸ Alberti, III: §56.

⁷⁹ “The ideal of beauty, which the most expert have difficulty discerning, eludes the ignorant.” Alberti, III: §56.

visual form was to master it, to grasp it, to take it from nature and adapt it to a given set of circumstances. Imitation, for Alberti, is a statement of knowledge. In Mantegna's *Mars and Venus*, this statement has several layers of meaning.

The presence and process of imitation in Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* has been the subject of some exceptional scholarship. Phyllis Lehmann linked Mantegna's figures to specific ancient models, a combination of reliefs, sarcophagi, and antiquarian drawings that Mantegna could have seen in Rome, Padua, or Mantua.⁸⁰ In each case, Mantegna altered his prototype, turning the head, shifting the balance of weight, or changing the gesture in order to fit the figure into the narrative context of the *Mars and Venus*. But in each case, the antique prototype remains visible beneath the alterations, a not-so-subtle nod to the source, something undoubtedly meant to be recognized by the scholarly viewer.

By taking Classical sculpture as his model, Mantegna applied Alberti's formula to the specific concerns of his commission. He recreated, to the best of his ability, a Classical setting for a classicizing image, following the shared critical principles of Albertian art theory and Ciceronian rhetoric. It was a Classical beauty, an antiquarian's sense of beauty, that Mantegna wanted to capture, to grasp, in this painting, the type of ideal that would appeal specifically to Isabella and her learned guests as they sat in the *marchesa's studiolo* pouring over the fragments of antiquity themselves. The *Mars and*

⁸⁰ The most convincing associations link Mantegna's Muses to drawings made after ancient reliefs by Cyriacus of Ancona. Michael Vickers expands on Lehmann's analysis by linking the figure of Mars to an antique figure from the *Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus*. Lehmann, "The Sources and Meaning of Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 90-115; Michael Vickers, "The Source of Mars in Mantegna's *Parnassus*," *The Burlington Magazine* 120 (1978): 151-153. See also, Lightbown, *Mantegna*, 223. Cf. Kristeller, *Andrea Mantegna*, 335.

Venus was meant for students of antiquity, for the scholars of antiquity, for an audience of *cognoscenti*.

Mantegna's *all' antica* style, his sculptural handling of the figure, engages the visual character of Isabella's antiquities, forging a connection that ultimately reverberates on the thematic level. On the one hand, it presented the artist himself as antiquarian, as a "professore de antiquità," someone well versed in the intricacies of the ancient world.⁸¹ On the other hand, it provided a forum for connoisseurship, inviting Isabella and her guests to demonstrate their knowledge and evaluate the artist's skill in capturing antique forms.

Mantegna's classicism and process of imitation, however, extend beyond his sculptural handling of the figures. "Imitation," according to Quintilian, "should not be restricted to words. What we must fix our minds on is the propriety with which the great men handle circumstances and persons, their strategy, their arrangement..."⁸² It is in the formal arrangement, or composition, of Mantegna's painting that the concept of imitation and the artist's engagement with the Classical past find their most profound expression, an expression that continues to engage the critical vocabulary linking Albertian art theory and ancient rhetoric. Eloquent composition, according to Cicero, "indulges in the neatness and symmetry of sentences," in "rounded periods,"⁸³ ideas that are essentially part of the *Mars and Venus*. "Frequently," Cicero adds, "things inconsistent are placed

⁸¹ For a discussion of Mantegna's style as an instance of self-fashioning, see Stephen J. Campbell, "Mantegna's Triumph: The Cultural Politics of Imitation *all' antica* at the Court of Mantua, 1490-1530" in *Artists at Court: Image-Making and Identity 1300-1550*, ed. S.J Campbell (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2004), 91-105.

⁸² Quintilian, *Institutiones oratoriae* X: ii, §27 in *The Orator's Education*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), vol. 4, 335. Henceforth, "Quintilian."

⁸³ Cicero, quoted in Summers, "Contrapposto," 346.

side by side, and things contrasted are paired...⁸⁴ “Among the chief features that give our speeches distinction,” he continues later, “are words used in antithesis, and this category is often witty as well.”⁸⁵

As David Summers has shown, antithesis, or its Latin translation *contrapositum*, occupied a unique place in the history of style. Antithesis was the principle structural device for Cicero’s periodic style. Based on Cicero’s writings, Renaissance humanists incorporated antithesis into their own collection of stylistic tools. It was singularly important for Petrarch’s work, for instance. He took his lead from a number of ancient writers, as well as St. Augustine.⁸⁶ For Alberti, antithesis became an element of visual diction, an extension of the formula of *contrapposto* found in ancient sculpture.

Quintilian provides the metaphorical precedent this time.

What is so contorted and elaborately wrought as Myron’s famous *Discobolus*? But would not any critic who disapproved of it because it was not upright show how far he was from understanding its art, in which the very novelty and difficulty of the pose are what most deserve praise? The same grace and charm are produced by Figures, whether of Thought or of Speech. They represent a deviation from the norm, and make a virtue of their distance from common or vulgar usage.⁸⁷

What Quintilian finds pleasing is the movement or flow of Myron’s figure, the variety and charm of the curve—the body’s arrangement or *dispositio*, which he likens to the arrangement and flow of ornate diction. Alberti, too, considered pictorial diction or visual *elocutio* to be the result of compositional arrangement, and the first thing that gives pleasure in the *historia*, he states, is variety. Following Cicero and Quintilian, Alberti

⁸⁴ Cicero, quoted in Summers, “Contrapposto,” 346.

⁸⁵ Cicero, II, 263.

⁸⁶ Quillen, “Introduction: Petrarch’s *Secret* and Renaissance Humanism,” 1-41; see also Gill, *Augustine in the Renaissance*, 94-124; and note 18 above.

⁸⁷ Quintilian, II, xiii, 9-12. Summers, “Contrapposto,” 337; Shearman, *Mannerism*, 83-86.

advises the painter to organize figures, groups of figures, and even colors by the juxtaposition of opposites—that is, by antithesis or *contrapposto*.⁸⁸

For Alberti, then, *contrapposto* was more than a form of pictorial ornament or *copia*. It was display of *varietà* and *facilità*, a form of visual organization, a juxtaposition of antithetical compliments—*rerum condordia discors*. *Contrapposto* was a humanist motif, a means to intellectually and stylistically engage antiquity. It was a way for painters to imitate the ancients and display the principles of nature with pictorial eloquence.⁸⁹

Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* demonstrates a deep understanding of Alberti's *De Pictura* with regards to *contrapposto*. Indeed, the principle of *contrapposto* is so fundamental to the *Mars and Venus* that it functions in all three parts of the *historia*: circumscription (the delineation of individual figures), composition (the way the figures are organized in relation to one another), and the reception of light (color). This has direct ramifications for how the *Mars and Venus* is read.

Venus stands with her weight on her left leg while her right is relaxed. The angle of her hips contrasts that of her knees. She props her outside hand on her side, as her right actively interweaves itself with the left arm of Mars. Mars, Mercury, and Pegasus all

⁸⁸“There should be some bodies that face towards us, and others going away, to right and left. Of these some parts should be shown towards the spectator, and others should be turned away; some should be raised upwards and others directed downwards.” Alberti, II, §39-40, quotation from 43; Summers, “*Contrapposto*,” 342.

⁸⁹ Summers, “*Contrapposto*,” 342. Manfredo Tafuri presents evidence that Alberti was also concerned with this manner of composition in the area of architecture. See Manfredo Tafuri, “Discordant Harmony from Alberti to Zuccari,” *Architectural Design* 49 (1979): 36-44. For the humanist underpinnings of Alberti's text see Crieghton Gilbert, “Antique Frameworks for Renaissance Art Theory: Alberti and Pino,” *Marsyas* 45 (1943): 87-106; E.H. Gombrich, “A Classical Topos in the Introduction to Alberti's *Della Pittura*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 20 (1957): 173; Carroll W. Westfall's excellent article, “Painting and the Liberal Arts: Alberti's View,” *Journal for the History of Ideas* 30 (1969): 487-506; Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 121-139; Grafton, “*Historia and Istoria*,” 37-68. Helpful information can also be found in Carl Goldstein, “Rhetoric and Art History in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque,” *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 641-652.

stand in a similar chiasmic manner, perfectly stylized representations of the human form dictated by the *concinnitas* of nature.⁹⁰ Mercury's distribution of weight, moreover, simultaneously contrasts and complements that of Pegasus. The same holds true for Mars and Venus. Even the interaction between Vulcan and Cupid is articulated as the juxtaposition of antithetical complements. The curve of Cupid's gesture mirrors that of Vulcan, creating a formal link strong enough to visually and conceptually unite the two as a single compositional unit—as one viewer apparently noted when he or she scratched the faint line connecting Cupid's pipe to Vulcan's groin. Here, however, the pairing is more complex. While Vulcan's gesture manifests his rage, a dramatic but clumsy chiasmic distribution of weight, the body language of Cupid reads as mischievous and playful. The god of love fans the flames of desire and anger in Vulcan; the interaction between these figures thus constitutes a thematic antithesis, similar to that of Mars and Venus, the god of war and goddess of love.

Mantegna's most daring display of *contrapposto* comprises the two central Muses prominently framed under the arch. Their gestures correspond perfectly. The left figure turns her head to the rear, showing her back to the viewer, as she firmly plants her outermost leg. Her counterpart turns toward the viewer, exposing the front of her torso as she gently places her outermost foot on the ground. Their garments display a shift

⁹⁰ For Alberti, *concinnitas*, which translates literally as "symmetry," is the absolute rule of Nature and as such the limits of artistic *ingenium* and the ideal of Beauty. "I have known many [who] make serious mistakes in this respect. They represent movements that are too violent, and make visible simultaneously in one and the same figure both chest and buttocks, which is physically impossible and indecent to look at." Alberti II §44; Summers, "Contrapposto," 339-340. See also J. Bialostocki, "The Power of Beauty: A Utopian Idea of Leon Battista Alberti," in *Studien zur toskanischen Kunst: Festschrift für L.H. Heydenreich*, eds. W. Lotz and L. Möller (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1964), 16; Martin Kemp, "Introduction," in L.B. Alberti, *On Painting* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 8. Mantegna's figures demonstrate a natural sense of movement—they are examples of a reserved *contrapposto* rather than the *figura serpentinata*. The fact that Mantegna arranges his figures in a way that adheres not only to the general principles of *De Pictura*, but that he also abides by the limits Alberti sets out in this text is one of the most compelling links between the Alberti's theory on painting and the *Mars and Venus*.

between the complementary pigments of red and green on the one hand, and fields of orange and blue on the other. As Alberti notes,

This combining of colors will enhance the attractiveness of the painting by its variety, and its beauty by comparison. There is a kind of sympathy among colors, whereby their grace and beauty is increased when they are placed side by side. If red stands between blue and green, it somehow enhances their beauty as well as its own.⁹¹

Together these two figures make the centrality of *contrapposto* an explicit aspect of the painting, linking this manner of pictorial arrangement to the rhythms and variety of the Muses' graceful movements, just as Quintilian did in his metaphorical description of movement in Myron's *Discobolus*.

Alberti envisioned the *historia* as "rhetoric in paint."⁹² His concept of pictorial composition is an extension of rhetorical composition. In rhetoric, *compositio* is a technical concept that referred to the structure of language, literally the putting together of a sentence or period. The period consists of a hierarchy of elements: the sentence comprises clauses; clauses are made of phrases; and phrases are a combination of words. Alberti's conception of the *historia* mirrors this construction. A narrative scene comprises bodies; bodies are made of members; and members are composed of planes. As Michael Baxandall has perceptively shown, there is a natural affinity between Albertian and oratorical composition, a parallel between the constituent parts. Planes correspond to words, members to phrases, bodies to clauses, the picture to a period.⁹³ This is especially true for Mantegna's *Mars and Venus*, where the prevalence of *contrapposto* makes the connection between pictorial composition and rhetorical syntax all the more pronounced.

⁹¹ Alberti, II: §48. See also, Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., "Alberti's Color Theory: A Medieval Bottle without Renaissance Wine," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969): 109-34. For a broader discussion of Renaissance color theory, see Marcia Hall, *Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), especially 47-52.

⁹² Grafton, "Historia and Istorica," 67.

⁹³ Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 131.

Mantegna's use of *contrapposto* and the connection it forges between his image and oratorical theory engages the specific grammatical capacities of humanist Latin. The narrative structure of the *Mars and Venus*, the *historia*, corresponds to that of a periodic sentence, "the basic art form of the early humanists," according to Baxandall, "a test of prowess, a focus for criticism, the full flower of the classical way with words and notions."⁹⁴ Like Mantegna's use of *contrapposto*, periodic composition was a form of imitation for the humanists, a demonstration of mastery over Classical vocabulary and syntax. The appeal rests in the difficulty of this manner of speaking, in the variety it afforded language, the same virtues found in a painter's use of *contrapposto*.⁹⁵

The kind of periodic sentence most admired by Renaissance humanists took the form of the conditional: if A, then B; though A, yet B; as in A, so too in B, etc.⁹⁶ It had slots that needed to be filled, in other words. The *protasis*, the opening clauses or subordinate section of the period (A), induced suspense, drama, or perhaps even humor. It grabs the listener's attention. The second and main section of the period—the *apodosis* (B)—resolves the suspense and is the logical consequence of the *protasis*.⁹⁷ The period, like Mantegna's picture, combines complex ideas in balanced, often antithetical clauses. For Aristotle, "The periodic style...is either simply divided...or it is antithetical, where, in each of the two members, one of one pair of opposites is put along with another pair, or the same word is used to bracket two opposites..."⁹⁸ The period, according to

⁹⁴ Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 20.

⁹⁵ Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 24; Summers, "Contrapposto," 339.

⁹⁶ Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 20.

⁹⁷ Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 20.

⁹⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III, 1409b-1410a in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Aristotle, is a manner of speaking that is clear and easy to follow. Antithetical construction, or *contrapposto*, amplifies these particular benefits.

Such a form of speech is satisfying, because the significance of contrasted ideas is easily felt, especially when they are put side by side, and also because it has the effect of a logical argument; it is by putting two opposing conclusions side by side that you prove one of them false.⁹⁹

Here we come to the heart of the matter of imitation in Mantegna's *Mars and Venus*. The fact that Mantegna uses *contrapposto* as a formal and thematic structure suggests that the painter has adopted the rhetorical form of a logical argument. Quintilian expands on this notion, linking antithesis to a particular type of inductive reasoning, the rhetoric of defense.

There is another form of defense in which we defend an action which is itself unacceptable by taking up external resources. This is called *kat' antithesin*, "by antithesis."...the strongest line to take here is to defend the charges by the motive of the act...the act is not defended in itself, as in the Absolute form of Question, nor by an act of the other side, but by some result advantageous to the state or to a large number of people...¹⁰⁰

Mantegna's painting acknowledges the presence of two possible conclusions regarding the union of Mars and Venus, two antithetical interpretations, but it presents one. As Fiera's poem shows, the figure of Vulcan raging in his cave alludes to the vicious nature of the affair. But as we have already seen, Mantegna characterizes Vulcan in a rather disparaging way. He is taunted, mocked, and shown as a "simpleton." Mantegna amplifies the mocking tone of these puns with his selective use of the pigment cinnabar in pure hue. The most saturated, eye-catching fields of crimson are, from left to right: the billowing drapery behind Vulcan's head; the garment of the third Muse in the foreground; the tunic, sash, and plum of Mars; the band of fabric lining the couch behind

⁹⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III, 1410a.

¹⁰⁰ Quintilian, VII, iv, 7-10.

the lovers; and Mercury's hat. The parallel between Vulcan's drapery and Mercury's hat "rounds out" the scene in Cicero's sense of the term. It chromatically reinforces Mantegna's formal symmetry. The emphasis on Mars and the setting of the affair serve to focus the viewer's attention on the union of the two deities. Venus's creamy skin tone functions in a similar way. The connection between Vulcan's drapery and the Muse, however, adds a level of nuance to the sense of mockery. Visually the two figures engage one another, and on closer inspection, the gesture of Muse parallels that of Vulcan. Her gracefulness serves to further emphasize his clumsiness—insult is added to injury.

Wind touched on an important level of meaning when he interpreted mockery and humor as a form of vindication. Laughter, according to Quintilian, "possesses perhaps the most commanding and irresistible force of all...it often turns the scale in very important matters...As Cicero says, it has its basis in a certain deformity and ugliness. Pointing out these in others is called 'urbanity'..."¹⁰¹ The puns and humorous characterization of Vulcan allow Isabella's learned guests to amuse one another, but they also vindicate the union of Mars and Venus by defusing Vulcan's vindictive animosity. In a way, Isabella and her guests would reenact Homer's story, playing the role of the council of the gods, participants in the mockery of Vulcan. Those who manage to navigate the audience through the composition, who catch the puns and display their "urbanity," take the place of Apollo and Mercury, the gods of poetry and eloquence, an appropriate award for the courtier's competitive game—as Cicero says, "everyone admires cleverness."¹⁰²

Vulcan is a humorous prelude to the allegorical celebrations of Mercury, Apollo, Pegasus and the Muses, a witty, dramatic foil to the scene taking place in the foreground.

¹⁰¹ Quintilian, VI, iii, 7-10.

¹⁰² Cf. Campbell, "Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 68-87.

He is the *protasis*, the subordinate figure in the conditional statement that is Mantegna's *historia*—a role that is reinforced by the figure's scale and his exclusion from the foreground. The *apodosis*, or "*fondamento principale*"¹⁰³ of the image, the level of meaning that requires a spectator with serious philosophical predilections, concerns the virtuous marriage of Mars and Venus, and more specifically the unadulterated character of Venus, the goddess of Beauty.

Mars and Venus stand atop the arch as a single unit, divisible into two antithetical bodies, but united as interlaced and harmonious complements. As Gombrich argues, Mantegna joins and reconciles these two "ancient enemies," creating an allegory of Harmony that is very much a "discordant concord of things." By engaging the philosophical commentary on Homer, as well as Homer's text itself, Mantegna's painting does not defend the union of Mars and Venus "in the Absolute form of Question," but by reference to an advantageous result, the end of strife, the birth of Harmony—the image reasons "*kat antithesin*."

That being said, there are important ruptures between this image and its textual sources. Venus and Mars are not coequals. They stand united, reconciled, but it is Venus who stands in triumph, located on the central axis of the image. As Fiera suggests, the figure of Venus is the true subject of Mantegna's painting. What the divinities of poetry—and ultimately the courtiers present in Isabella's *studiolo*—are celebrating, then, is not only the union of these two figures, but also the ability of Venus to conquer strife, the power of this Classical goddess of Beauty, the virtuous character of Beauty itself.

¹⁰³ Quotation from Isabella d'Este's program sent to Perugino, in Verheyen, *The Paintings for the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*, 25-27.

Several iconographic details support this conclusion. As Lehmann has pointed out, the squirrel, which appears in the foreground, is a heraldic symbol of triumph over force, a theme that is reinforced by the laurel behind Apollo, the Muses, Mercury and Pegasus, a symbol of peace and *virtù*. The wall of foliage behind Venus and Mars is myrtle, a plant linked to marriage but specifically associated with the figure of Venus.¹⁰⁴ Mantegna's myrtle bears two different kinds of fruit. Two quinces, "the wedding fruit par excellence"¹⁰⁵ in the words of Panofsky, appear near Venus's hip and Mars's shin, while several oranges, the "golden apple of Venus,"¹⁰⁶ grow on the branches next to the god of war, giving symbolic expression to his inner fixation on this "Venus of beautiful form."

Fiera makes it clear that the figure of Venus is not a representation of Isabella d'Este, but Venus is a complex reflection of Isabella in some way. Lehmann again provides important insights, despite the fact that she repeats Fiera's mistake. The colors of red, white, blue, and gold that envelop the figures of Mars and Venus are the primary colors of the Gonzaga and d'Este coats of arms, the same colors that originally appeared in the *studiolo*'s ceiling and in several examples of majolica later commissioned by the *marchesa*.¹⁰⁷ Lehmann's most important conclusion, however, concerns the pivotal connection between Isabella and the particular cast of characters in Mantegna's painting. Isabella d'Este married Francesco Gonzaga on February 11, 1490, on a day when her astrologers determined it would be advantageous to hold the ceremonies. At this time, the planets Mercury, Mars, and Venus all stood within the sign of Aquarius, just as these mythological figures stand before the Hippocrene spring, joined by Vulcan, Cupid, the

¹⁰⁴ Lehmann, "The Sources and Meaning of Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 168-169.

¹⁰⁵ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 163.

¹⁰⁶ Lehmann, "The Sources and Meaning of Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 169. For a discussion of quinces in Alfonso d'Este's *camerino*, see Colantuono, "*Dies Alcyoniae*," 251.

¹⁰⁷ Lehmann, "The Sources and Meaning of Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 165-166.

Muses, and Pegasus. Mantegna's Pegasus wears a harness comprising exactly fifteen jewels, calling to mind Ovid's description of the Pegasus-constellation, which consists of fifteen stars. On the day of Isabella's wedding, moreover, the westernmost bright star of the Pegasus-constellation fell within the sign of Aquarius; the planet Mercury was in ascendance, just as he is here the largest figure in Mantegna's composition; and the planets Mars and Venus rose harmoniously in the sky, standing equal distance from and flanking Mercury.¹⁰⁸

Writing several years before Roger Jones published Fiera's poem, Lehmann came to the logical conclusion that Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* is an allegorical image of Isabella's marriage. Now we know that this is not the case.¹⁰⁹ This painting is rather an allegorical characterization of Isabella's role as *marchesa* of Mantua, a statement about her place at the Gonzaga court, a place that, as both Campbell and San Juan have shown, was essentially linked to her possession of a *studiolo* and her collection of ancient artifacts.

Mantegna's figurative classicism draws a distinct parallel between the moralizing nature of the *Mars and Venus* and the visual character of the antiquities displayed alongside it. Indeed, Mantegna leads the spectator to this connection—but the spectator only connects. Mantegna does not empower the viewer to determine whether or not Isabella's objects constitute a display of magnificence or avarice, nor does this image enable Isabella's collectibles to “embody knowledge.” The visual link between the *marchesa*'s antiquities and Mantegna's antiquarian sense of beauty allows the *Mars and*

¹⁰⁸ Lehmann, “The Sources and Meaning of Mantegna's *Parnassus*,” 174.

¹⁰⁹ See Lightbown, *Mantegna*, 229-230.

Venus to conceptually color the viewer's understanding of Isabella's objects, marking them as objects of worth.

The *Mars and Venus* may acknowledge two possible interpretations of the story it depicts, but it presents one. Mantegna structures the narrative in such a way that the scene can only be read as virtuous union. He challenged the learned viewer to demonstrate his or her connoisseurial skills and erudition, to display his or her wit and sophistication. When reading the *Mars and Venus*—when carefully reading the *Mars and Venus*—the complementary juxtaposition of Cupid and Vulcan, as well as the other puns, invite the viewer to reveal and revel in Mantegna's visual jocosity. This humorous prelude captures the attention of those present in the room, allowing the more serious process of allegorical exegesis to take place. But the particularity of Mantegna's version of this allegory, the extent to which his *Mars and Venus* calls for an “iconology of difference,” allows the painting's allegorical import to engage the viewer's understanding of Isabella's influence on Mantuan society.

Just as the planet Mercury stood in ascendance on the day when Isabella officially became the *marchesa* of Mantua, so too, here, the figure of Mercury is the largest in Mantegna's scene, the one closest to the picture plan. The god of eloquence carries an exceptionally long caduceus, a symbol of peace and concord, one that points directly at the figure of Venus.¹¹⁰ The Latin “*caduceus*” derives from the Greek, “*kerukein*,” which is based on the word “*kerux*” or “herald.” Together the ascendant pair of Mercury and Pegasus, the symbol of poetic flight, herald the virtuous union of Mars and Venus, their *fama chiara*, as Ripa would later define the terms.¹¹¹ Their message, like the image itself,

¹¹⁰ Lightbown, *Mantegna*, 225.

¹¹¹ Wind, *Bellini's Feast of the Gods*, 12.

is focused on Venus. Poetic eloquence, symbolically represented in these two figures and actively manifested in the discursive games taking place in the *studiolo*, acclaims the virtue of Mantegna's Venus, whose beautiful form not only silenced the violent tendencies of Mars, the god of war, but also inspired the celebrations of Apollo and the Muses, figures of artistic inspiration.

Fiera's clever little pun on the *bella* in "Isabella" begins to take on a serious meaning here. When observers make connections between Mantegna's figural forms and Isabella's collectibles and begin to act out Homer's story, taking part in the mockery of Vulcan, the allegorical virtues ascribed to Venus begin to associate themselves with Isabella as well. It was Venus's beauty that inspired Mercury and Apollo in Homer's story, just as it was Isabella's patronage, her games, her collection, and her cultivated self, that inspired the eloquent interpretations of her learned guest, those who play "Apollo" and "Mercury" in her *studiolo*.¹¹² Venus served as a metaphor for the virtuous character of Isabella as a patron of the arts, for Isabella's cultivated persona, her cultural presence at the court of Mantua.

In this sense, the *Mars and Venus* reinstates the *rerum concordia discors* of Castiglione's "mean," realigning the *marchesa* with the ideal of the "Court Lady." Isabella's *studiolo* gives her a more pronounced visibility, but Mantegna's painting inserts her into a modest position within that space. The *marchesa* and her chamber become the source of inspiration, both for the artist and for the "poet's fancy." Mantegna literally paints Isabella's patronage and collecting habits in a decorous, positive light.

¹¹² Julius Caesar Scaliger touched on a similar idea around 1520 when he portrayed Isabella as the "tenth Muse." J.F.C. Richards, "The *Elysium* of Julius Caesar Bordonis (Scaliger)," *Studies in the Renaissance* 9 (1962): 195-217; Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 140.

III: Mantegna and the Orators

A single letter links Mario Equicola to the paintings in Alfonso d'Este's *camerino*.¹¹³

Unfortunately, despite the richness of the Gonzaga papers, there is no such extant letter linking any of the scholars in Isabella d'Este's service to Mantegna's *Mars and Venus*.

The fact that Mantegna worked on this painting in Mantua, in close proximity to Isabella and the humanists associated with the court, means that the advisor could easily have instructed the artist orally. But the accidents of history undoubtedly obscure matters further. The voluminous files of correspondence to and from Isabella in the Archivio di Stato are, after all, only a fraction of the material that might have come down to us.¹¹⁴

In the absence of a documented advisor, art historians have created something that resembles a list of suspects. Henry Thode and Paul Kristeller, writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, maintain that Mantegna had no advisor, that he devised the painting's literary invention himself. Lehmann tentatively raised this idea again in 1973.¹¹⁵ This argument draws heavily on Lorenzo da Pavia's comparison between Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini. Bellini is a better colorist, Lorenzo informs Isabella, but "in *invencione* [sic] no one can rival Mantegna."¹¹⁶ However, it is important to note that Lorenzo does not ground his analysis in a specific work, nor does he specify

¹¹³ John Shearman, "Alfonso d'Este's Camerino," in *Il se rendit en Italie: Études offertes à André Chastel* (Roma : Edizioni dell' Elefante, 1987), 209-230; see also Colantuono, "Dies Alcyoniae," 237-256.

¹¹⁴ The most informative discussion of Isabella's circle of humanists is a series of articles by Alessandro Luzio and Rodolfo Renier entitled "La cultura e le relazioni letterarie d'Isabella d'Este Gonzaga." These articles were originally published between 1899 and 1903 in the *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*. Now, they are collected in a single volume, A. Luzio and R. Renier, *La cultura e le relazioni letterarie di Isabella d'Este Gonzaga* (Milano: Sylvestre Bonnard, 2005).

¹¹⁵ Henry Thode, *Mantegna* (Bielefeld and Leipzig: Velhagen & Klasing, 1897), 103; Kristeller, *Andrea Mantegna*, 345; Lehmann, "The Sources and Meaning of Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 175-178.

¹¹⁶ Letters of 6 and 16 July, 1504 and 16 October 1506, published in Kristeller, *Andrea Mantegna*, docs. 70, 71, and 83; and Brown and Lorenzoni, *Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia*, 101. Quoted in Kemp, "From *Mimesis* to *Fantasia*," 359.

whether he means *invenzione* in the visual or literary sense of the word.¹¹⁷ What he offers is a general characterization of two artists, one that does not necessarily reflect the circumstances of any specific contract between Mantegna and Isabella.

Wind proposed a more probable scenario in 1948, arguing that Paride da Ceresara advised Mantegna. Paride is known to have provided programs for Perugino and Costa, and it is likely that he did so for Mantegna as well.¹¹⁸ In 1971, however, Egon Verheyen challenged this idea, maintaining that Paride's invention for Perugino is notably different from the instructions Mantegna must have received. In his "Battle of Love and Chastity," Paride distinguishes between a general theme, the *fondamento principale*—represented in the figures of Minerva, Diana, Venus, and Cupid—and ornaments or other subsidiary illustrations of that theme. In Mantegna's images, no figure can be classified as an ornament; no figure can be removed without destroying the basic sense of the painting as a whole. Mantegna, then, must have worked with another scholar, and for Verheyen the

¹¹⁷ See Martin Kemp's excellent discussion of *invenzione* as a concept in art theory in "From *Mimesis* to *Fantasia*," 347-360. "Excogitative" invention refers to a manner of almost scientific discovery, a visual articulation of natural principals, such as the theoretical relation between the proportions of the human body and the proportions of an architectural structure. "Literary-poetic" invention refers to the more common usage of the term "*invenzione*" in art-historical discourse: a pre-determined program devised by a humanist scholar. Kemp discusses Lorenzo da Pavia's letter in the context of a poetic-literary invention (page 359), maintaining the distinction he draws between "excogitative" invention in architectural theory and "literary-poetic" invention in theories on painting. I, however, wonder if Kemp drew this distinction too sharply. There seems to be more room for exchange between the theoretical discourses concerning painting and architecture than Kemp acknowledges. In *De Pictura*, for instance, Alberti states, "Is it not true that painting is the mistress of all the arts or their principal ornaments...If I am not mistaken, the architect took from the painter, architraves, capitals, bases, columns, and pediments, and all the other fine features of buildings," Alberti, II: §26. This quotation is taken from the open paragraphs of Book II, where Alberti argues that the principles of painting he is in the process of outlining engage every art, "except the very meanest" (ibid.). In the lines quoted, he is deliberately crossing disciplinary boundaries, relating painting to architecture, suggesting that painting too is a process of discovery, of invention in the excogitative sense. This idea, however, requires further research, and unfortunately falls outside the boundaries of the present paper.

¹¹⁸ Wind, *Bellini's Feast of the Gods*, 14-16; see also Yriarte, "Isabella d'Este et les artistes de son temps," 397; Peter Hirschfeld, *Mäzene: Die Rolle des Auftraggebers in der Kunst* (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1968), 127-129.

most likely candidate is Mario Equicola, who entered the service of the d'Este family around 1497, shortly after finishing his *Libro di Natura de Amora*.¹¹⁹

Ronald Lightbown rejected Verheyen's argument in 1986, and rightly so. The connection Verheyen sees between Isabella's *studiolo* and the humanist climate in Ferrara is exceptionally insightful—and perhaps underappreciated—but the connection between Equicola and the *Mars and Venus* is tenuous. The date of Equicola's arrival in Ferrara is more complicated than Verheyen acknowledges. Stephen Kolsky, for instance, does not place Equicola in Ferrara until after Isabella installed the *Mars and Venus* in her *studiolo*.¹²⁰

While Lightbown does suggest new ways of exploring the relationship between Mantegna and his advisor, he accepts Verheyen's dismissal of Paride too easily.¹²¹ Paride da Ceresara should not be disregarded.¹²² Verheyen's reasons for disqualifying him fail to consider Mantegna's proximity to Paride, and they are predicated on the assumption that his inventions all conform to a rigid model. Isabella's letters, however, suggest that Paride was flexible with his inventions, that "every day [he was] required to supply new inventions."¹²³ Given his level of involvement in Isabella's arrangements with Costa and

¹¹⁹ Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*, 27-29. For more information on Mario Equicola, see Colanuttono, *Titian, Colonna, and the Renaissance Sense of Procreation*, forthcoming; Mario Equicola, *La redazione manoscritta del' Libro de natura de amore di Mario Equicola*, ed. Laura Ricci (Rome: Bulzoni, 1999); Stephen Kolsky, *Mario Equicola: The Real Courtier* (Genève: Libraire Droz, 1991).

¹²⁰ Lightbown, *Mantegna*, 218-222; Kolsky, *Mario Equicola*, 46-50.

¹²¹ The strongest aspect of Lightbown's argument links the iconography of Mantegna's *Minerva* to Battista Spagnoli's *De calamitatibus temporum* (1479), where Virtue appears as a military goddess, a destroyer of monsters, and declares that whatever qualities the ancients ascribed to Hercules, Pallas, Apollo, and the Muses were facets of herself. Lightbown, *Mantegna*, 218-222, 230-232. Cf. Campbell, "Mantegna's *Parnassus*," 82, n. 14; idem., *The Cabinet of Eros*, 149. See also, Alessandro Luzio and Rodolfo Renier, "Niccolò da Correggio," *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 21 (1893): 205-264, 22 (1893): 65-119.

¹²² See Clifford M. Brown, *Isabella d'Este in the Ducal Palace in Mantua: An Overview of Her Rooms in the Castello di San Giorgio and the Corte Vecchia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005), 60.

¹²³ Quotation from Isabella's 1504 letter to Paride, published in Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, I, 372.

Perugino, who was originally approached around 1496, and the fact that Paride's connections to the Gonzaga family can be traced to 1494, he remains the most probable scholar in Isabella's circle to have advised Mantegna.¹²⁴

If Paride is, indeed, the third protagonist in the creative dialogue that led to the completion of the *Mars and Venus*, his role would have been to invent the literary program of the scene, to give poetic expression to Isabella's ideas and the image she wished to display during the cultural performances taking place in her *studiolo*. Isabella's concerns, in part through her interactions with Paride and Mantegna and in part of their own accord, operate and find expression in an intellectual forum. Despite much that has been written with regard to her "difficult personality," Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* shows that Isabella d'Este Gonzaga was not only sympathetic to the idea of artistic *ingegno*, but that she also had a vested interest in promoting it.

Isabella's letters continually refer to Mantegna as the standard of quality for her *studiolo*—quality meaning skill in artistic execution.¹²⁵ What Mantegna is responsible for is the *historia* of the *Mars and Venus*, the visual articulation of the "poetic invention." Mantegna's use of *contrapposto* fashions a link between the *scientia* of painting and humanist Latinity, a link that gives visual form not only to Isabella's program but also to the principles of *De Pictura*. The intellectual exchange among Mantegna, his advisor, and Isabella marks a moment in fifteenth-century history where politics, humanism, and painting are brought together. Learned spectators could potentially translate this pictorial

¹²⁴ See, in particular, Lorenzo da Pavia's letter, 8 May 1497 in Brown and Lorenzoni, *Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia*, 43; Vianello's letters to Isabella, 1 April, 1501 and 28 June, 1501 in Brown and Lorenzoni, *Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia*, 158, 159.

¹²⁵ Lightbown, *Mantegna*, 217. Giovanni Bellini was apparently reluctant to execute Isabella's invention because his painting would hang beside Mantegna's. Brown and Lorenzoni, *Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia*, 149-167, specifically 159; Fletcher, "Isabella d'Este and Giovanni Bellini's *Presepio*," 703-712.

composition into oratorical form. It is through this dialogue, this interaction between word and image, that the *Mars and Venus* comes to characterize the *studiolo* as a space of study, a space for the pursuit of eloquence. On another level, this structural engagement with the syntax of Classical and Renaissance Latin links Mantegna himself to the culture of letters and antiquarianism present in Isabella's *studiolo*. Mantegna presents himself exactly as Isabella famously described him, as a “*professore de antichità*,” as an artist capable of blending textual exegesis and visual archeology. To borrow from Alberti, “his fame is open and known to all, and his own good painting is eloquent witness to it.”¹²⁶

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¹²⁶ Alberti III §62. Quintilian, XII:x §6.

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