

## Post-Platonism: Rethinking the Relations of Art, Love and Desire, 1500-1767

James Grantham Turner

James D. Hart Professor, University of California, Berkeley

### TEXTS QUOTED IN OPENING REMARKS

1. ‘That provision should be made for continuing the race of so great, so exalted and godlike a Being as man – I am far from denying – but philosophy speaks freely of every thing ; and therefore I still think and do maintain it to be a pity, that it should be done by means of a passion which bends down the faculties, and turns all the wisdom, contemplations, and operations of the soul backwards — a passion, my dear’, continued my father, addressing himself to my mother, ‘which couples and equals wise men with fools, and makes us come out of caverns and hiding-places more like satyrs and fourfooted beasts than men.’

‘I know it will be said’, continued my father (availing himself of the Prolepsis) ‘that in itself, and simply taken — like hunger, or thirst, or sleep — ’tis an affair neither good or bad—or shameful or otherwise. — Why then did the delicacy of Diogenes and Plato so recalcitrate against it? and wherefore, when we go about to make and plant a man, do we put out the candle? and for what reason is it, that all the parts thereof – the congrements – the preparations – the instruments, and whatever serves thereto, are so held as to be conveyed to a cleanly mind by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever?

— ‘The act of killing and destroying a man’, continued my father, raising his voice – and turning to my uncle Toby – ‘you see, is glorious – and the weapons by which we do it are honourable — We march with them upon our shoulders — We strut with them by our sides — We gild them — We carve them — We in-lay them — We enrich them — Nay, if it be but a scoundril cannon, we cast an ornament upon the breech of it.’

*from* Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Vol. IX (1767), chapter 33

2. ....Qu'a fait l'action genitale aux hommes, si naturelle, si necessaire et si juste, pour n'en oser parler sans vergongne et pour l'exclure des propos serieux et reglez? Nous prononçons hardiment: *tuer, desrober, trahir*; et cela, nous n'oserions qu'entre les dents? ... Nous mangeons bien et bevons comme les bestes, mais ce ne sont pas actions qui empeschent les operations de nostre ame. En celles-là nous gardons nostre avantage sur elles; cette-cy met toute autre pensée sous le joug, abrutit et abestit par son imperieuse autorité toute la theologie et philosophie qui en est en Platon; et si il ne s'en plaint pas. ... Certes, c'est une marque non seulement de nostre corruption originelle, mais aussi de nostre vanité et deformité. D'un costé, nature nous y pousse, ayant attaché à ce desir la plus noble, utile et plaisante de toutes ses operations; et la nous laisse, d'autre part, accuser et fuir comme insolente et deshonneste, en rougir et recommander l'abstinence. Sommes nous pas bien bruttes de nommer brutale l'operation qui nous fait ... d'appeller l'action honteuse, et honteuses les parties qui y servent (asteure sont les miennes proprement honteuses et peneuses)? ... Chacun fuit à le voir naistre, chacun suit à le voir mourir. Pour le destruire, on cherche un champ spacieux en pleine lumiere; pour le construire, on se musse dans un creux tenebreux et contraint ...

.... Je ne sçay qui a peu mal mesler Pallas et les Muses avec Venus, et les refroidir envers l'Amour; mais je ne voy aucunes deitez qui s'aviennent mieux, ny qui s'entredoivent plus. Qui osterà aux muses les imaginations amoureuses, leur desrobera le plus bel entretien qu'elles ayent et la plus noble matiere de leur ouvrage

What is it about human genital action – so natural, so necessary, so right – that we don't dare talk about it without shame and we exclude it from serious, orderly discussions? We boldly utter the words 'kill', 'rob', 'betray' – and yet *that* we wouldn't dare utter except through clenched teeth.... We eat and drink just fine the way the animals do, but those activities don't prevent the operation of the soul. We keep the upper hand over them. Sex forces all other thought under its yoke, brutalizes and bestializes by its imperious authority all the theology and philosophy in Plato – and, yes, he doesn't complain about it! ... Certainly this is a mark, not only of our original corruption, but also of our vanity and deformity. On one hand Nature drives us to it, having linked to this desire the most noble, useful and pleasurable of all her operations; on the other hand she makes us accuse it, shun it as insolent and base, blush at it and preach abstinence. Well, aren't we brutes to call 'brutal' the very operation that makes us ... to call the action 'shameful' and *pudenda* the parts that serve it (right now

mine are truly shameful and wretched)? ... Everyone runs away from seeing a man born, everyone follows the crowd to see him die. For his destruction we seek out a spacious well-lit plaza, for his construction we huddle in a dark and cramped burrow.

I don't know who can have put Pallas and the Muses on bad terms with Venus and made them cold towards Love; on the contrary, I know no deities better suited or more indebted to one another. Whoever takes away from the Muses their amorous imaginations will rob them of their best discourse and the noblest matter of their work.

from Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* III.v, 'Sur des Vers de Virgile' (1588)

3. I poeti e gli scultori antichi e moderni soglion scrivere e scolpire alcuna volta per trastullo de l'ingegno cose lascive ... Disperomi del giudicio ladro e de la consuetudine porca che proibisce agli occhi quel che più gli diletta. Che male è il vedere montare un uom a dosso a una donna? Adunque le bestie debbon essere più libere di noi? A me parrebbe che il cotale datoci da la natura per conservazion di se stessa si dovesse portare al collo come pendente, e ne la beretta per medaglia. Pero che egli è la vena che scaturisce i fiumi de le genti, e l'ambrosia che beve il mondo ne i dí solenni. ... Onde se gli doverebbe ordinar Ferie, e sacrar Vigilie, e Feste, e non rinchiuderlo in un poco di panno, o di seta. Le mani starien bene ascose, perché quelle giuocano i danari, giurano il falso, prestano a usura, ti fan le fica, stracciano, tirano, dan de le pugna, feriscono e amazzano. Che vi par de la bocca, che bestemmia, sputa nel viso, divora, imbriaica e rece? Insomma i legisti si potrebben fare onore ne l'agiungere una chiosa per suo conto ai libracci loro

Poets and sculptors ancient and modern often write and sculpt lascivious things to amuse the mind ... I despair of the criminal judgement and filthy conventionality that prohibits to the eyes what delights them most. What's so bad about seeing a man mount on the back of a lady? So the animals should be freer than us? It would seem to me that the such-and-such that Nature gave us to preserve herself should be worn round the neck as a pendant, and in the cap as a medal. For this is the vein that pours forth the river of people and the ambrosia that the world drinks on solemn days. ... Therefore they should establish Holidays and consecrate Vigils and Festivals for it, not shut it up in a bit of cloth or silk. The hands should properly be hidden, because they gamble with money, bear false witness, lend at usury, give you the finger, shred, lug, punch, wound and kill. And how does the mouth look, that blasphemers, spits in your face, devours, boozes and retches? In short, the law-makers should do it honour and add something on its behalf to their vile law books.

from Pietro Aretino, letter to Battista Zatti (1537), for a pocket edition of *I Modi*, illustrated sexual positions with commentary sonnets

#### **OTHER WORKS CITED** (in order of first appearance)

James Grantham Turner, *Eros Visible: Art, Sexuality and Antiquity in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven and London, 2017), in press; *Schooling Sex: Libertine Literature and Erotic Education in Italy, France, and England, 1534–1685* (Oxford, 2003), 38–41; 'Sexual Awakening As Radical Enlightenment: Arousal and Ontogeny in Buffon and La Mettrie', in Shane Agin (ed.), *Sex Education in Eighteenth-Century France, SVEC/ Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 2011.9 (Oxford, 2011), 237–66

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* IV.313–14, 316, VIII.530–1

Pietro Aretino, *Dialogo nel quale la Nanna . . . insegna a la Pippa* (Venice, 1536), in *Sei giornate*,

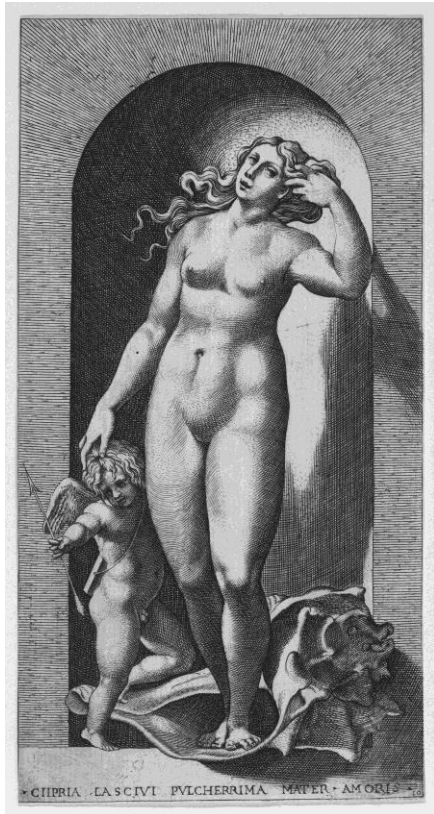
ed. Guido Davico Bonino (Turin, 1975), 312–13; *Lettere*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Rome, 1997–2002), I.9, I.308, IV.295, V.419

Patricia Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe*, (Cambridge, 2011), 103, 167

Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria del Arsiccio Intronato*, ed. Pasquale Stoppelli, intro. Nino Borsellino (Rome, 1984), 44–5

Marsilio Ficino, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon*, ed. and transl. Raymond Marcel (Paris, 1956), 199, 206, 207–8, 229, 247–8; *Le divine lettere*, transl. Felice Figliucci (Venice, 1546), 319–20; *Platonic Theology*, Book 13, chapter 3

- Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, rev. edn (Oxford, 1980), 48–56, 60–61, 68, 155 n. 8
- Phyllis Pray Bober, ‘The Legacy of Pomponius Laetus’, in *Roma nella svolta tra Quattro e Cinquecento*, ed. Stefano Colonna (Rome, 2004), 456
- Plato, *Symposium* 189c–193d, 210a–212b; *Phaedrus* 251
- Helen Morales, *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatius’ Leucippe and Clitophon* (Cambridge and New York, 2004), 32
- Benedetto Varchi, *Due lezioni, nella prima delle quali si dichiara un sonetto di M. Michelagnolo Buonarroti* (Florence, 1549)
- Sergius Koderer, *Disreputable Bodies: Magic, Medicine, and Gender in Renaissance Natural Philosophy* (Toronto, 2010)
- Pablo Maurette, ‘Plato’s Hermaphrodite and a Vindication of the Sense of Touch in the Sixteenth Century’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 68 (2015), 872–98
- Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d’amore* (Rome, 1535)
- Tullia d’Aragona, *Della infinità d’amore* (Venice, 1547)
- Sperone Speroni discussed in Mary Pardo ‘Artifice as Seduction in Titian’, in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe: Institutions, Texts, Images*, ed. James Grantham Turner (Cambridge, 1993), 58
- Pietro Bembo, *Lettere*, I, ed. Ernesto Travi (Bologna, 1987), 98, 100, 102
- Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Cabalistarum selectiora*, (Venice, 1549), f. 85v
- Niccolò da Correggio, *Opere: Cefalo, Psiche, Silva, Rime*, ed. Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti. (Bari, 1969), 55, 78, 93, 170
- Angelo Poliziano, *The ‘Stanze’*, ed. and transl. David Quint (Amherst, 1979), 6, 34, 60
- Jean Seznec, *La Survivance des dieux antiques: essai sur le rôle de la tradition mythologique dans l’humanisme et dans l’art de la Renaissance*, Studies of the Warburg Institute 11 (London, 1940), 3
- Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo dei colori* (Venice, 1565); letter to Alessandro Contarini, in *Dolce’s ‘Aretino’ and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento*, ed. Mark W. Roskill (1968), Renaissance Society of America Reprint Texts 10 (Toronto and Buffalo, 2000), 216
- Fernando Checa, *Tiziano y la monarquía hispánica: usos y funciones de la pintura veneciana en España (siglos XVI y XVII)* (Madrid, 1994), 100
- Todd P. Olson, *Caravaggio’s Pitiful Relics* (London and New Haven, 2014), 144–8
- Roberto Bartolini, ‘Sodoma a Palazzo Chigi’, in *Scritti per l’Istituto germanico di storia dell’arte di Firenze*, ed. Cristina Acidini Luchinat *et al.* (Florence, 1997), 234
- Roberto Zapperi, ‘Alessandro Farnese, Giovanni Della Casa and Titian’s Danae in Naples’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 54 (1991), 159–71
- Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), *L’epistolario*, ed. Lionello Puppi (Florence, 2012), letter 177 (to Philip II)
- Marco Boschini, *Le ricche minere della pittura veneziana*, 2nd edn (Venice, 1674), f. b5r–5v (summary of conversations with Palma Il Giovane, describing Titian’s techniques)
- Miguel Falomir, Paul Joannides and Elisa Mora, *Dánae y Venus y Adonis, las primeras ‘poesías’ de Tiziano para Felipe II/Titian: Danaë, Venus and Adonis, the Early ‘Poesie’*, *Boletín del Museo del Prado*, special number (Madrid, 2014), 54, 75
- Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, ‘Jouissance’



Gian Jacopo Caraglio after Rosso Fiorentino, *Venus* (from the series *Gods in Niches*), engraving

## IMAGE LIST

Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, tempera on canvas. Florence, Uffizi

Raphael, *Galatea*, fresco. Rome, Villa Farnesina

Correggio, *Venus and Cupid Asleep, Watched by a Satyr* (formerly known as *Jupiter and Antiope*), oil on canvas. Paris, Louvre

Titian, *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, oil on canvas. Madrid, Prado

Titian, *Pardo Venus (Jupiter and Antiope?)*, oil on canvas. Paris, Louvre

After Giulio Romano and Marcantonio Raimondi, *I Modi* position 5, reconstructed from engraving fragments and wash drawing. London, British Museum

Francesco Xanto Avelli, *Roma lasciva dal buon Carlo Quinto partita a mezzo*, dated 1534, tin-glazed maiolica plate. St Petersburg, Hermitage

Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, oil on canvas. Madrid, Prado

Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin*, oil on canvas. Paris, Louvre

After Michelangelo, *Leda and the Swan*, oil on canvas. London, National Gallery

Pontormo after Michelangelo, *Venus Kissing Cupid*, oil on panel. Florence, Accademia

Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, oil on canvas. Florence, Uffizi

Titian, *Danaë*, oil on canvas. Madrid, Prado

Baldassare Peruzzi, *Allegory of the Artist Receiving Inspiration from Venus, Minerva and the Muses*, pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash, accents in red chalk applied dry and as wash on flesh areas of figures, over black chalk, traces of squaring in black chalk. Private collection