

A Dirty Mind is a Joy Forever

**Bronzino's Portrait of Cosimo I as Orpheus
studied in the light of the Artist's Burlesque Poetry**

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Preface

It was predominantly as a painter that Agnolo Bronzino was known and regarded since the dawning of the academic field of art history. During his own lifespan the artist was admired for his refined and elegant style; it was not for nothing that Cosimo I de' Medici appointed him as his court portraitist almost as soon as he had taken power. During the following centuries, though, Bronzino's pictures were tarnished by the label of mannerism and considered too artificial and contrived – a flagrant illustration of art's alleged sixteenth-century degeneration. It would take until the second half of the twentieth century for scholars to look more favourably upon Bronzino's works again; the renewed interest in his paintings resulted in several exhibitions revolving around the artist and his world. Not only, however, was Bronzino a sophisticated court painter; he was also a particularly enchanting poet. It is in the light of his poetry and in particular his work in the genre of burlesque that I studied one of the artist's portraits in this thesis, thus satisfying my fascination for Italian art as well as abiding by my lifelong predilection for literature; I am and remain, after all, a philologist. To the seasoned art historian the ensuing research may appear rather unusual, as it focuses slightly more on text and context than on the visual art itself. However, as one who is devoted to pictures almost as much as to words, it is my conviction – a true one, I think, in view of this essay's conclusions – that it is through combining and connecting different fields of research that we may advance all of them. Though such an interweaving of disciplines has been proven difficult at times – the question of methodology particularly often seriously challenged my intellect – I have applied myself to this thesis with great pleasure. I can only hope that its reader will delight just as much as I did in the fascinating and even playful literary and artistic activities and products of Bronzino and his surroundings.

At this point I would like to thank my supervisor Bram de Klerck for his help and useful suggestions during the early stages of the writing process. Also, I would like express my gratitude to critical friend Paul van Uum for his proofreading of my first chapter. Last but not least, many words of thanks must go to Ruud Meulendijks for his stimulating and unwavering support and encouragement.

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Introduction

When, at the end of the first century BC, the Roman author Quintus Horatius Flaccus linked painting to poetry in his well-known maxim *ut pictura poesis*, he could hardly have foreseen the enormous appeal his aphorism would exert on the Italian humanists some fifteen hundred years later.¹ In seeking ways to obtain for the visual arts the status so far bestowed only upon writing and philosophy, the early-modern thinkers eagerly employed the famous analogy as a basis for their fundamental theory of painting.² It has rightly been pointed out that in this process of appropriation the meaning of the parallel was actually reversed.³ Whereas in antiquity the comparison had functioned merely as a means to comment on the art of writing – its point simply being that words and pictures may affect audiences in the same way – from the fifteenth century onward it was regularly invoked as a sanction for a much closer connection between painting and poetry than the ancients would have ever conceived of. By the sixteenth century, the two disciplines were considered almost identical in their essential makeup. Not only were artists regarded as poets and writers taken for painters; they also frequently engaged in each other's occupations.⁴ In the context of such a hybrid view of the literary and visual arts it is my belief that a thorough understanding of Cinquecento poetry and its conventions can be helpful in analysing the art works of the period. The upcoming analysis intends to show whether there is any truth to this assumption.

Given the extent to which sixteenth-century authors conceived of painting and poetry as analogous, interdisciplinary studies combining the two branches are remarkably thin on the ground. Art historians tend to regard written works primarily as sourcebooks containing the themes found in the visual arts, without looking any further into the conventions governing the texts on their part.⁵ Even less is to be expected from literary scholars and philologists; treating poems first and foremost as self-contained units, they rarely show any real interest in the paintings and sculptures produced in their wake. Nevertheless, our research field is not entirely virgin territory: in particular around the

¹ The axiom can be found in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (lines 361-365). The idea of a connection between painting and writing had previously been voiced by several Greek authors: Aristotle in his *Poetics* (VI.19-21) had stated that the notion of the plot in tragedy was similar to the concept of design in painting. In Plutarch's *De gloria Atheniensium* (III.346F-347C) we find the saying, attributed to one Simonides, that painting is nothing more than silent poetry and poetry is in fact a painting that speaks.

² For a discussion of the history of the arts and their position through the ages one may consult Kristeller 1951.

³ See Lee 1967 for the classic treatment of the topic.

⁴ Cochrane 1973 (79): 'Artists [...] were expected to talk intelligently about poetry. [...] Poets, in turn, were expected to talk authoritatively about art.' Michelangelo and Vasari are undoubtedly the most celebrated artist-writers of the period. Other less well-known (though no less prolific) examples are Cellini and Bronzino.

⁵ For this tendency see Rijser 2012. Even though his work is justly considered canonical up to this day, Lee's 1967 approach is indicative for much art-historical research. In the case study following his account of the humanistic doctrine of *ut pictura poesis*, literary products are discussed only in so far as they served as a topic storehouse for the pictures under examination; the texts themselves are barely explored.

mid-twentieth century, the connection between Cinquecento writing and art was the subject of a substantial number of studies. These were largely conducted in the light of the contemporary discussion about the notion of mannerism. Their main focus lay on an effort to establish a universal definition of the concept by attempting to discern characteristics common to different media. In their search for an all-encompassing description of mannerist art, however, academics consistently failed to take into account the social and geographical contexts of the works they examined. As a result, their analyses often yielded highly ingenious yet slightly far-fetched conclusions: thus, amongst other things, it was alleged that the many-sidedness of the *figura serpentinata* typical of Italian statues was on a par with the multifaceted personality of Hamlet, whilst the paradoxes in John Milton's poetry were equalled to the dissonant proportions found in Parmigianino's pictures.⁶ As interesting as such correlations may be, they do not particularly enhance our understanding of sixteenth-century art. Besides, the question of mannerism is a scholarly minefield I consider too vast and daunting to be ventured upon in the short span of this essay.⁷ To sum up, then, an all too sweeping investigation centred on a stylistic idea does not seem the best way to confront our subject. Perhaps a contrary approach – taking as its starting point one individual work of art and its particular context – will be less unfruitful. Rather than the creation of a monolithic movement or era often constructed in retrospect only, art is after all invariably the product of its own circumstances.

For the purposes of this thesis I have decided to focus my attention on Agnolo Bronzino's depiction of Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus (figure 1). It is one of the most enigmatic pictures Cinquecento Italy has brought forth – as we will see, no certainty regarding its interpretation or function has been reached up till now – and as such makes an excellent topic for our current research; in keeping with the considerations set out above, I suspect that a familiarity with the literary context of the work may shed light on its original meaning. In the following section, we will begin our survey by examining the painting and its subject matter from an art-historical viewpoint. The question of method, naturally arising from an account of the portrait's *status quaestionis*, will also be addressed in this chapter. Thenceforth a path will be outlined for the subsequent parts of this essay. Now, however, let us first acquaint ourselves with our principal *objet d'art* and all its peculiarities.

⁶ Consult Mirollo 1984 (35-48) for an overview of such interdisciplinary studies.

⁷ The concept's turbulent history is explored in Mirollo 1984 (1-71) and Aurenhammer 2016.

I: A most peculiar portrait

Cosimo I de' Medici's features have been captured in countless portraits and busts. By far the most extraordinary of these representations was created around 1540 by Agnolo Bronzino. The artist's first endeavour to portray his lord consists of an almost life-sized oil painting depicting Florence's brand-new ruler – Cosimo would govern the city from 1537 up to 1574 – as Orpheus, the mythical musician who played his lyre so appeasingly that he was able to enchant all of nature; according to legend, even wild animals and barbarians were lulled into calm by his song.⁸ When Orpheus' wife Eurydice was mortally bitten by a viper and carried away to the underworld, the poet decided to go down into Hades to win her back with his music. After having charmed the ferocious Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the realm of the dead, he was able to excite Pluto's pity. The god allowed the young suitor to lead Eurydice back to earth on one condition: he was forbidden to turn round to look at her until both lovers were safely among the living again. Orpheus managed to bring his beloved up to the gates of Hades – only to watch her fall back forever into the abyss of death when, upon reaching the sunlight, he could not resist glancing over his shoulder.⁹

In accordance with mythological lore, Bronzino's portrait pictures Cosimo resting a *lira da braccio* against his left thigh – the bow can still be seen in his right hand – after having tamed Pluto's savage monster. With the left and rear of his barely covered upper body and leg bathed in light against a shadowy background – the painting's only other figural elements are rendered in muted shades of brown – the victorious hero turns around to cast his gaze intently towards us. Though the rendering of the Duke's physiognomy is flattering, the figure's small and youthful face seems to be out of line with its robust physique, giving the overall painting a slightly awkward quality. Even more intriguing, however, is the question regarding the portrait's function; apart from the fact that it entered the Philadelphia Museum of Art from a private collection in 1950, we know virtually nothing about its origins or purpose.¹⁰ Vasari never mentions the work, nor is it included in any historical document or record.¹¹ As a result, it has been hard to establish the circumstances of its creation – indeed, we do

⁸ The painting has almost unanimously been attributed to Bronzino; for two early exceptions, see Simon 1985 (25). Its subject was once misidentified as Cosimo's son Francesco. By 1970, however, the work was universally regarded as Bronzino's earliest portrait of Cosimo himself. Technical analysis of this and other portraits of Bronzino by Cox-Rearick and Westerman Bulgarella 2004 (118-133) has corroborated this assumption. The painting is usually dated around 1540 due to the presence of some slight facial hair; the beard that Cosimo began to grow in 1537 and would wear for the rest of his life would be short but full by the time Bronzino depicted him in armour in 1543.

⁹ The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is told by several ancient authors. The best-known versions were written by Virgil and Ovid. The former incorporates the myth in his *Georgics* (4.444-527). The latter recounts the legend in his *Metamorphoses* (10-11).

¹⁰ According to the website of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the portrait was a gift of Mrs John Wintersteen.

¹¹ For Vasari's biography of Bronzino I employed the online translation provided by Project Gutenberg.

not even know whether Cosimo himself was the one who commissioned it. The various problems concerning the portrait's interpretation will be the focus of the principal part of this chapter. With regard to the original function of the work, conventional art-historical research has advanced three main lines of thought. However, as I aim to show in my discussion of these readings, none of them is entirely convincing; to clarify the picture's meaning, therefore, we might need to resort to procedures more common to adjacent fields of study. Given that Bronzino was not only a highly talented painter but also a fairly brilliant poet, his writings appear to be a good starting point for an interdisciplinary investigation of this kind. Such an inquiry obviously demands that sufficient thought be given to matters of approach. Accordingly, the final part of this section will be dealing with questions of methodology. In order to sketch out the art-historical context too, however, as well as to offer a prelude to the first theory regarding our portrait, we shall start off our investigation with a brief analysis of what was without a doubt one of its most important – and perhaps only – models.

A poet as propaganda: Baccio Bandinelli's *Orpheus*

Around the year 1518, Roman Pontiff Leo X and his cousin Cardinal Giulio de' Medici commissioned the Florentine artist Baccio Bandinelli to sculpt a freestanding statue for the Medici Palace courtyard (figure 2). Just as Bronzino's portrait of Cosimo, the carving was to portray Orpheus' voyage to the kingdom of Pluto; a calm and mollified Cerberus fittingly accompanies Bandinelli's sculpture.

Amid the plethora of art works produced in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Bandinelli's statue is a highly unusual specimen.¹² Although Orpheus had been a popular character in the learned and literary circles of early-modern Florence – especially amongst Ficino and his followers his reputation as the founder of civilised society based upon law and order reached a culminating point – he does not regularly occur in the visual arts of the period.¹³ The small number of pieces that do depict the hero usually show him in a natural environment playing his instrument in front of a throng of animals. In such cases, Orpheus is primarily associated with the idea of creative activity and merely serves as an allegory of the artist. The lyricist's journey to the underworld and his attempt to bring back his beloved are hardly ever portrayed at this time. In fact, apart from Bronzino's portrait of Cosimo and Bandinelli's statue, we know of only one other work of the era in which Cerberus is shown along with the poet: in 1528, Agostino Veneziano, a pupil of the prolific

¹² As follows, this holds true for Cosimo's portrait too.

¹³ Much of my discussion of this topic is based on a 1982 study by Scavizzi; its appendix contains a list of every work featuring Orpheus that was executed in Italy between 1400 and 1600. Scavizzi concludes his overview of art featuring the hero as follows (148): 'We are surprised to find that so few of the great artists of the time dealt with him. Even among the engravers of the sixteenth century [...] Orpheus is not commonly found.' For Ficino's conception of Orpheus see Warden 1982 (85-110) and Newby 1987 (129-143).

Roman engraver Marcantonio Raimondi, produced an illustration in which he depicted Orpheus stroking his lyre whilst the guard dog of Hades emerges from a cavern to the left (figure 3).¹⁴

Even though Bandinelli's sculpture is extremely atypical in view of its antecedents in the pictorial arts, his depiction of Orpheus fully concurs with the humanistic notion of the poet: towering triumphantly over the meek and pacified hound of Hades, the legendary musician becomes the embodiment of reason and the personification of order. This portrayal perfectly suits the supposed meaning of the work. Given the fact that Leo X was himself an avid composer of music, Bandinelli's design was without a doubt intended to allude directly to the Pontiff and his intention to re-establish a harmonious Medici reign after an eighteen-year exile; the statue served as an indication that calm and stability were to be restored to Florence after a period of turmoil and crisis.¹⁵ In this context, the inclusion of Cerberus into the work turns out to be less enigmatic than it appears. As a composer of pastoral songs who literally went to hell and back, Orpheus had for centuries been interpreted as a type of Christ: the Good Shepherd who ventured into Limbo. The sculpture's allusion to the poet's voyage into Hades thus serves to further underpin the envisioned analogy between Leo X – Christ's agent and spokesman on earth – and the mythological hero that was the harbinger of peace.¹⁶

A musician's many-sided talents: interpreting Bronzino's painting

It was about twenty years after Leo X had commissioned his *Orpheus with Cerberus* that Bronzino produced the allegorical portrait of the young Cosimo I de' Medici as the poet of ancient myth. As was stated in the introduction to this chapter, it has been difficult to ascertain how and why this work was commissioned due to the dearth of source material. Nevertheless, many scholars have put forward an interpretation of the work. Their theories will be discussed in this section.

¹⁴ For the sake of completeness I am compelled to say that one other early-modern portrayal of Orpheus enchanting Cerberus exists. It is found in one of the pendentives of the vault in Andrea Mantegna's Camera degli Sposi in the Ducal Palace at Mantua (1472-1474). This fresco, however, is part of a series comprising other mythological heroes and episodes of the life of Orpheus as well and thus differs from the works under discussion in that it is not an autonomous illustration.

¹⁵ The first to interpret the statue in this way was Langedijk 1976. The Medici had been the *de facto* rulers of the Republic of Florence until they were driven out in 1494. In the following years, the republican government was the only one in Italy to be siding with the French in the conflict between European powers that was to keep the peninsula in its grip during the first decades of the sixteenth century. When an army of Papal and Spanish soldiers threatened to sack the city in 1512, the Medici were reluctantly called back and reinstated into power. After Giovanni de' Medici's appointment as Pope Leo X in 1513, governmental control was exercised from the Vatican through the Pontiff's cousin Giulio, the bishop and Papal governor of Florence.

¹⁶ Langedijk 1976 (40); Langedijk's interpretation of the statue has never been questioned.

The political reading

Faced with the lack of documentary evidence relating to our portrait, art historians often stress the straightforward connection that appears to exist between Bronzino's painting and Bandinelli's statue for the Medici courtyard; the picture's quotation of the Vatican *Torso Belvedere* (figure 4) seems to have been inspired directly by the reinterpretation of the *Belvedere Apollo* in the sculpture for Leo X (figure 5).¹⁷ Bearing in mind that the subject of Orpheus was such an uncommon one in Florentine art of the sixteenth century, it is tempting to think that a common conception underlied both works and to subsequently interpret the painting in the light of the statue's political statement. To be sure, the historical circumstances surrounding the production of Cosimo's portrait were remarkably similar to those pertaining to the Pope's commission. The position of the Medici had been precarious since their return to power in 1530 after a second period of exile. Moreover, the harsh and promiscuous behaviour of the incompetent Duke Alessandro, who had ruled the city from 1533 to 1537, had not done their reputation much good.¹⁸ When Cosimo was chosen as Alessandro's successor after the latter had been stealthily murdered by his own cousin, he was, as a result, faced with a suspicious and hardly obliging public. The fact that he belonged to a branch of the family that was only distantly related to the illustrious main line of Cosimo il Vecchio that had governed the city up to this point did not do much to support his position either.¹⁹ During the first years of his reign, then, Cosimo had every reason to confirm his position as lord of Florence and try to win over the populace by presenting himself as a peaceful prince – just as Leo X had attempted two decades ago.

All things considered, it is not surprising that art historians have associated Cosimo's portrait with the political circumstances of his early reign. Foremost of these was Karla Langedijk, according to whom the idea of Orpheus as the image of the perfect prince, already hinted at in Bandinelli's statue, is only fully developed in Bronzino's painting.²⁰ Other authors have in addition drawn attention to the innuendo that seems to be implied by the use of the *Torso Belvedere* as a model. This antique sculpture was at the time believed to represent Hercules: the legendary protector of Florence and alter ego of Cosimo's predecessor Alessandro. Besides casting himself in the role of the peaceful Orpheus, these scholars claim, the newly appointed lord also intended to be presented as a bold and

¹⁷ Note also Cat. Florence 2010 (no. II.3): '[Bandinelli and Bronzino] established a close dialogue in which we can easily imagine that Baccio, the elder of the two, was the one who suggested ideas.'

¹⁸ As long as the dominion of the Medici Popes assured their safety and independence, the citizens of Florence seem to have been prepared to put up with their rulership. Once the Papacy's fortunes of war changed and Rome was sacked in 1527, however, the Florentine populace turned against their leaders and drove the Medici out of the city again – only to be left completely isolated when, soon after, all major war-waging parties were reconciled. Under the threat of total annihilation by Papal and imperial troops, the Republic of Florence eventually capitulated and agreed to the return of the Medici once more.

¹⁹ Cosimo was a descendant of Cosimo il Vecchio's brother Lorenzo.

²⁰ Langedijk 1976 (48).

vigorous leader able to guard the city against enemies and foes. At the same time, the connection between Hercules and his precursor enabled the young Duke to associate himself with the stock of the magnificent Cosimo il Vecchio.²¹ A representation of Cosimo I as the great defender of Florence certainly seems apt with regard to the events that took place during his first year in office; only six months after his installment, he decisively defeated the army of formerly exiled republicans whose hopes of driving out the Medici again had been rekindled by Alessandro's death. It has in fact been suggested that in choosing to show Orpheus as already having subdued Cerberus, rather than in the process of calming the beast, Bronzino was responding to this particular victory.²² This idea may be supported by the fact that in the portrait's original design, exposed during a reconstruction in 1985, at least one of Cerberus' heads was not yet placated – we will return to this in a moment.

On the whole, the theory that the iconography of our portrait is related to the ideological content clearly present in Bandinelli's sculpture is a compelling one. However, several factors are found to be inconsistent with a purely political reading of the work, as in fact most scholars have acknowledged.²³ First of all, Bronzino's picture is a sheer oddity in both Cosimo's propagandist programme and the artist's career as court painter.²⁴ Only one other mythological portrait by Bronzino is known to us today – and it differs from the one in question in one very important respect: the painting of Andrea Doria as the Roman god of the sea (figure 6) in no way constitutes a true likeness of the sitter.²⁵ Secondly, the fact that the painting is not mentioned by Vasari nor listed in any contemporary record seems to imply that the work was not intended for public display. This theory is corroborated by the fact that, despite Cosimo's habit to disseminate his image by donating replicas of his portraits to Popes and princes, the painting is only known to us from this version; no copies or reproductions have ever been identified.²⁶ All in all, it appears that Bronzino's depiction of Cosimo was aimed at a limited audience and meant to be placed in a private setting.

The hypothesis that our portrait was conceived in an intimate context is supported by the painting's unusual imagery; instead of presenting the spectator with the idealised image of a triumphant hero, as Bandinelli's *Orpheus* had done, Bronzino's faithful portrayal of the young lord of Florence

²¹ Partridge 2009 (169-170); for a more detailed discussion of Cosimo's use of Hercules imagery one may consult Forster 1971 (79-82).

²² Cat. Philadelphia 2004 (no. 38).

²³ The only exceptions seem to be Langedijk 1976, Gáldy 2013 and Barolsky 2014, but it must be stated that they all refer to Bronzino's portrait only in passing.

²⁴ Simon 1985 (17); note that Forster 1971 (83) mentions the portrait only to mark out its difference from the ideologically charged ruler portraits he is examining. Van Veen 2006, who also focuses on Cosimo's use of art as political propaganda, does not talk about the painting at all.

²⁵ Cat. Florence 2010 (no. V.5); Cat. Frankfurt am Main 2016 (no. 86).

²⁶ Simon 1985 (17-19); Cat. Philadelphia 2004 (no. 38).

expresses a flagrant sensuality. The striking nudity of the Duke and the ambiguous placement of his bow imbue the portrait with an eroticism that can hardly be disregarded – and must be considered meaningful on account of the discoveries made during the painting's 1985 restoration. Technical examination carried out during the treatment of the work clearly demonstrated that the image we look at today is in fact a reworking of an earlier composition. Initially, it turned out, Cosimo's crimson cloak was secured by a strap on his left shoulder and, as a result, chastely covered the lower part of his back and buttocks (figure 7). Besides that, the Duke was originally shown playing his instrument rather than suggestively positioning his bow between his legs.²⁷ Other modifications can be detected in the rendering of the violin's peg, the final version bearing a remarkable resemblance to a female's privates, and in the portrayal of Cerberus already mentioned above. Even if we cannot say who initiated the adjustments – the only thing we know is that they were made at a fairly late stage in the painting's production – the fact that they considerably altered its overall effect leads one to suspect that these lascivious overtones were deliberately included into the picture.²⁸ Why Cosimo, who is not renowned for any outstanding musical or literary talent, should have had a personal wish to be portrayed as a mythological poet – and a voluptuous one at that – is a question that has puzzled many an art historian. Exploration of the matter has yielded two main schools of thought.²⁹

The romantic reading

The first answer to the question as to how and why our painting came into being was put forward by Robert Simon in 1985. His explanation became widely accepted. Taking into consideration the portrait's erotic nature and its supposed time of production, Simon argued that the panel had most likely been a wedding gift for Eleonora di Toledo, whom Cosimo married in June 1539: 'Cosimo, seen in the guise of the most faithful of husbands, seems to encourage and entreat his beloved, who was quite likely the recipient of the picture.'³⁰ Simon's thesis appears watertight. After a closer look, however, his reading elicits a set of problems that are not easily passed over. Granting that pottery containing erotic scenes seems to have played a part in sixteenth-century wedding rituals and that

²⁷ Tucker 1985 (31).

²⁸ Tucker 1985 (31) accordingly concludes: 'In the reworked, final version, the heroic is superseded by the erotic.' It must be stated at this point that a blatant sensualism may be found in many of Bronzino's works. The allegorical portrait of Cosimo, however, appears to be unparalleled in its bawdiness; apart from Cosimo's naked body and his ambiguous gesture, the direction of Cerberus' right-eye gaze does not leave much to the imagination.

²⁹ In his Florence 2010 catalogue entry for the portrait of Andrea Doria (no. V.5), Philippe Costamagna presents a third theory, stating that Bronzino's depiction of Cosimo as Orpheus was painted in honour of the birth of the Duke's first male heir in 1541. He does not supply any arguments in support of his statement and his assumption appears to stand on its own in art-historical research; for these reasons, I have resolved not to discuss it in this thesis.

³⁰ Simon 1985 (21); in one of the footnotes of his 1971 essay, Forster, though not substantiating his claim, had already suggested that the portrait had been painted in relation to the wedding decorations of 1539.

marital bedrooms were often furnished with panels designed to stir up arousal – thereby assisting in the production of lots of healthy babies – such employment of an actual portrait would be unparalleled.³¹ Apart from this, the story of Orpheus seems hardly appropriate to the kind of romantic context presupposed by Simon; in the traditional accounts of the myth, the disillusioned tragic lover eventually renounces women altogether and directs his sexual attention to young boys instead, upon which he is brutally ripped to shreds by a band of frenzied Maenads.³² In a similar way, the only Italian precedent for the story, composed by Poliziano in 1480, ends with Orpheus boldly proclaiming his desire for luscious youngsters and advising husbands to flee their wives.³³ It is certainly striking that Simon omits this *Favola di Orfeo* from his account. Instead, the art historian grounds his interpretation of our portrait in a tradition of Orpheus as the perfect lover; in designing the painting, the scholar contends, Bronzino drew on courtly retellings of the myth. In these editions of the story, Eurydice eventually escapes from Hades and the two lovers live happily ever after.

Romantic adaptations of the Orpheus legend had existed as early as the eleventh century. However, the sweetheart version of the story appears to have been a purely medieval invention found mainly in Western European countries.³⁴ Accordingly, all the literary evidence Simon puts forward in support of his reading of our painting stems from French and English sources that were most likely outdated by the time the portrait of Cosimo was created – if they ever had been popular on the Italian peninsula at all.³⁵ Nothing in these writings is reminiscent of the Ovidian Orpheus the early-modern era was so fond of: the tragic hero of ancient myth is transformed into a chivalrous minstrel conquering bejeweled castles on his quest to redeem his damsel in distress out of the hands of fairy kings. The miniatures accompanying these accounts often do show Eurydice being returned to her husband – though always by medieval devils at the mouth of Christian hell.³⁶ If Bronzino did draw on such sources for his depiction of Orpheus, he definitely went to great lengths to conceal it.

³¹ Perhaps this is why Janet Cox-Rearick in the Florence 2002 catalogue (no. 17) says: ‘Given the gender conventions of the Renaissance, it seems unlikely that [the erotically charged] changes [to Bronzino’s portrait] were made in light of a gift to Eleonora.’ For erotic objects and marriage in early-modern Italy one may consult Ajmar-Wollheim 2010.

³² Cropper 2004 raises this point in passing. Nevertheless, she ultimately agrees with Simon’s interpretation.

³³ Interestingly, Brand and Pertile 1996 (166) have suggested that this work was possibly composed as part of some wedding festivities at Mantua. Newby 1987 (144), however, claimed that it was undoubtedly written and performed for the 1480 carnival. As it is, the exact import of the *Favola di Orfeo* remains enigmatic.

³⁴ The notion of Orpheus as the ideal medieval courtly lover is discussed by Friedman 1970 (146-212).

³⁵ Compare Newby 1987 (334): ‘Only during the late sixteenth century, when love was gradually detached from Platonic idealism and the concept of tragedy had been explored, did Orpheus’ adventure with Eurydice take on a positive connotation.’

³⁶ Friedman 1970 (172-173).

Just as the literary proof offered by Simon in favour of his interpretation is not exceedingly strong, the visual material adduced in support of his reading cannot be said to conclusively verify his theory either; none of the images presented undeniably picture Eurydice as having been safely restored to earth. A plaque attributed to Moderno in which the devil is shown returning the girl to her husband (figure 8) actually appears to be set in the underworld – as is evident from the winged souls present in the plate’s lower left corner – and thus may portray an episode preceding Orpheus’ final loss.³⁷ Surely an engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi does depict the poet’s beloved next to a dark cave (figure 9), but nothing in the image indicates with any certainty that she has just been successfully recovered from Hades.³⁸ Taking everything into account, Simon’s solution to the problem concerning the commissioning of our portrait does not appear to be completely and utterly satisfying.

The literary reading

Recently, several scholars have proposed a different reading of our painting. Calling attention to Bronzino’s cultural environment rather than a presumed patron’s personal circumstances, they contend that the production of Cosimo’s unusual portrait is to be connected with the painter’s literary activities.³⁹ After Michelangelo, Bronzino was the most prolific artist-poet brought forth by sixteenth-century Italy.⁴⁰ Both artists were members of the Accademia degli Umidi, an organisation consisting of artists, merchants and poets who would hold regular meetings in order to discuss and enrich the Tuscan language. In their company, Bronzino engaged in one of the most popular pursuits of the time: the composition of lyric verses in the tradition of Petrarch and – more importantly in regard to our painting – of *rime in burla*, a playful and ribald form of poetry that relied for its effect on sexual wordplay and innuendo. The Accademia degli Umidi was transformed into a state institution by Cosimo in 1541. Proponents of what we may label as the literary reading of Bronzino’s portrait accordingly argue that the panel was commissioned in honour of the Duke’s patronage of this organisation. The erotic ambiguities of the painting, they claim, would have had special appeal to the academy’s *literati* who would have delighted in the picture’s bawdy humour and irony. With reference to this theory it is particularly noteworthy that, while the portrait does not seem to have ever been in the ducal collections, it may appear to pop up in an inventory of possessions stolen from

³⁷ Galeazzo Mondella or Moderno was a goldsmith and medallist who was active in Northern Italy from the end of the fifteenth century onwards.

³⁸ Note that in the online collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the engraving is described as Orpheus playing his violin before Eurydice’s descent into the underworld.

³⁹ Cat. Philadelphia 2004 (no. 38); Partridge 2009 (170); Cropper 2004 (27-30) does consider this possibility, but, as was said earlier, eventually dismisses it in favour of Simon’s view.

⁴⁰ Cat. Frankfurt am Main 2016 (no. 106).

a certain Simone Berti just before 1650.⁴¹ Like Bronzino, Berti was a composer of burlesque poetry and a member of a successor institution of the Accademia degli Umidi. He may have inherited the panel from his father Giovanni, who was a poet with connections to the academy as well.⁴²

Though the literary interpretation of our painting appears to offer a persuading answer to the question involving the reasons for its creation, with no documentary evidence to back it up, it is doomed to remain sheer speculation. As a matter of fact, as long as the portrait does not show up in any record, letter or literary work of the period, we will not be able to attain any certainty as to why or by whom it was ordered – or whether it was even commissioned at all. This, I think, does not mean we should give up trying to gain insight into the meaning of the work altogether – we just need to look beyond the material and procedures of traditional art-historical research and deal with the matter in a different way. For this purpose, the presumed link between Bronzino's portrait and his activities as a burlesque poet does seem to be a good starting point. As was apparent from the preceding paragraphs, sexual ambiguity and wit appear to play a significant role in the painting. In addition, the importance of humour and irony in Bronzino's visual oeuvre in general has recently been underlined by a number of scholars.⁴³ His burlesque poetry, then, might well constitute one of the main backgrounds against which a contemporary viewer beheld the painter's art. Along these lines, it seems safe to suppose that a greater familiarity with Bronzino's comic verses will yield a better understanding of his allegorical portrait of Cosimo. In exactly what way an analysis of Bronzino's *rime in burla* can clarify our reading of this painting is, then, the main question to be answered in this thesis. Before we start our inquiry, however, we may want to go over some matters of approach. Two recent studies shall provide us with a solid basis for our exploration.

Adopting approaches: questions of methodology

Despite the fact that the popularity of Bronzino's paintings as a research topic significantly increased during the previous century – for hundreds of years his art had been deemed inferior to that of his prodigious precursors and thus unworthy of research – it would take until the end of the millennium for a scholar to take an interest in the artist's literary achievements.⁴⁴ In her 2000 publication,

⁴¹ Cat. Philadelphia 2004 (no. 38); Berti does not mention the artist, nor does he identify the sitter as Cosimo. The subject of Orpheus, however, was, as has already been noted, exceptionally rare in sixteenth-century Florentine painting.

⁴² Cat. Philadelphia 2004 (no. 38); Partridge 2009 (170).

⁴³ With regard to Bronzino's famous *London Allegory*, Barolsky and Ladis 1991 argue that, rather than trying to crack the code of the painter's emblematic idiom through an iconological reading of the picture, art historians should pay attention to the ludic mood that pervades his – intentionally equivocal – allegory. Following this train of thought, Falciani 2010 searches for humorous elements in Bronzino's religious works.

⁴⁴ See Pilliod 2001 (1-8) for an overview of twentieth-century scholarship on Bronzino's painting.

Deborah Parker was the first – and so far only – academic to carefully examine Bronzino’s poetical works. While the main goal of her book is to show that the painter’s verses are outstanding literary achievements in themselves, she also demonstrates how an understanding of Bronzino’s poems can be applied to his painting. After having analysed the modes of signification underlying the artist’s poetry in the first three chapters of her treatise, Parker embarks on a case study in which she uncovers similar representational strategies in the painter’s well-known – and notorious – *London Allegory*. Her approach, which is essentially grounded in semiotics, is definitely useful for our investigation inasmuch as it furnishes us with a way to apply our upcoming conclusions about Bronzino’s written works to his visual products. However, Parker’s method is not entirely flawless; confronting her topic as a literary scientist rather than as an art historian, the professor of Italian sometimes fails to bear in mind the social and historical context of the images she is trying to clarify. When, for example, she proposes to equate the commonly worn codpieces depicted on many of Bronzino’s portraits to the painter’s mocking use of the word *paintbrush* as a phallic euphemism in his poems, she is in my opinion taking her theories one step too far.⁴⁵

Another recent study of the connection between Italian poetry and painting – though not focused on Bronzino – may offer us a more useful paradigm for our investigation. In his 2012 dissertation about Raphael’s paintings and fresco’s, the classical scholar David Rijser concurs with Parker in presuming that a better understanding of contemporary literary practices and traditions can shed light on the meaning and function of art. Accordingly, the philologist suggests new ways to interpret Raphael’s oeuvre through an analysis of the Neo-Latin poetical works produced in the artist’s vicinity. His method corresponds closely to Parker’s; Rijser – to use his own words – *decodes* poetry so as to read art by applying the discovered system of signification to paintings and fresco’s. Nonetheless, the classicist insists, to truly understand art and its function we need to bear in mind its beholder as well: ‘We as interpreters of [Renaissance] culture should [...] consider what an image *meant*, that is, what the interaction of the viewer with the image consisted of.’⁴⁶ To fully reconstruct this beholder’s experience, Rijser says, it is crucial to study the work of art in its context. Not only must we delve into its literary and art-historical background; the social and historic conditions affecting its creation

⁴⁵ Parker 2000 (155); codpieces were an essential part of the sixteenth-century smart gentleman’s outfit. Even if they were occasionally mocked and used as an element of phallic humour in Carnival festivities, in daily life they were surely not worn as a kind of vulgar pun. According to Paulicelli 2014 (104-105) one of their purposes may have been to highlight a man’s virility and thus exalt his power. A functional link with an outbreak of syphilis has also been suggested to account for their popularity (Vicary 1989). In any case, they are a normal aspect of Cinquecento fashion and as such a common element in numerous portraits by various painters of the period; one should not, I think, label them as burlesque all too easily simply because they might seem offensive or even slightly preposterous nowadays.

⁴⁶ Rijser 2012 (xv).

ought to be investigated too.⁴⁷ While semiotics thus form a significant aspect of his method, Rijser's essay is deeply rooted in *Rezeptionsästhetik* as well.⁴⁸ By making a point of involving the artistic and societal context of the art works in question, Rijser urges us to establish what the literary scholar Robert Jauss would have called the *Erwartungshorizont* of the viewer.⁴⁹

Rijser's combination of semiotics and *Rezeptionsästhetik* seems to be an excellent basis for our current survey; it allows us to effectively study the connection between Bronzino's portrait and his poetry without turning a blind eye to the practical historical circumstances relevant to the painting. However, Rijser's essay differs from our investigation in one significant aspect: whereas his reconstruction of the observers' reactions to art is primarily based on testimonia written by the spectators themselves, we do not even know who may have participated in the interpretation of our portrait to begin with. How can we grant plausibility to our hypotheses about the *Erwartungshorizont* of our viewers when we do not have any certainty as regards their identities? To tackle this question, we might resort to the critical theory established by the German scholar Wolfgang Iser.⁵⁰ Rather than defining *Rezeptionsästhetik* as a study of real individual readers' responses to a text, Iser theorises the interpreting subject by substituting an implied reader for the actual flesh-and-blood one. This *impliziter Leser* is the one the author has in mind when composing a text and is represented in it by a network of structures inviting a certain reaction. It was in fact this text-oriented form of *Rezeptionsästhetik* that was acknowledged as useful for art history by Wolfgang Kemp in the introduction to his 1992 collection of essays in the field of reception theory: 'Rezeptionsästhetik, wie sie hier verstanden wird, arbeitet [...] werkorientiert, sie ist auf der Suche nach dem *impliziten Betrachter*.'⁵¹ Later on, the scholar justifies his statement in a way that applies seamlessly to our current subject: 'Es mag als ein Paradox erscheinen oder gar als methodische Verfehlung, dass ein Ansatz, der dem Betrachter seinen Anteil zurückgeben möchte, letztlich doch von ihm absieht und sich wieder an das Werk hält. Dazu ist zu sagen: Was wir haben, sind die Werke, und zu vielen

⁴⁷ In this respect, Rijser's research is reminiscent of earlier studies conducted by scholars such as John Shearman, who also argued for a kind of pragmatic historicism when confronting Renaissance art – see e.g. Shearman 1992 (4): 'In decoding messages from the other side [...] we get more meaningful results if we use their code rather than ours'.

⁴⁸ *Rezeptionsästhetik* or reader-response criticism is an approach that has its roots in literary studies and emphasises the reader as an important element in the interpretation of texts. It has only recently been appropriated as method by art history – see Kemp 1992 (8): 'Die Kunstwissenschaft muss erkennen, dass [...] sie es in der Regel noch nicht einmal für nötig hielt, eine Entwicklung zur Kenntnis zu nehmen, die in der Literaturwissenschaft nach über fünfzehn Jahren ihren Höhepunkt wohl schon überschritten hat.'

⁴⁹ Jauss introduced the notion of the *Erwartungshorizont* during his inaugural speech for the University of Konstanz in 1967. The concept in short comprises the entirety of contemporary cultural backgrounds and conventions by which a person in any given period in history comprehends and appraises a text.

⁵⁰ Iser first expounded his theory in *Die Appellstruktur der Texte* (1970).

⁵¹ Kemp 1992 (22).

kennen wir die Betrachter nicht.⁵² Looking at our investigation from this point of view, we find that the lack of testimonia relating to our painting is in fact not as problematical as it appeared at first sight. To draw truthful conclusions about the *Erwartungshorizont* of our spectators, we are not required to identify them; we just need to search for the viewer implied by the work. At this point, the method proposed by Kemp converges with that of Rijser – for in order to reconstruct the intended dialogue between object and addressee, Kemp maintains, one needs to consider the former's modes of communication in both their aesthetic and socio-historical context.⁵³

With our appropriation of Iser's concept of the implicit reader the difficulties involving our method appear to be out of the way. Yet two issues to be dealt with prior to setting off on our exploration remain. The first involves the subject of artistic intention, for assuming Bronzino created his portrait with a specific viewer in mind might imply regarding the painter as the operating agent in the process of interpretation. Venturing into the territory of authorial intent may be a hazardous undertaking; the topic continues to be hotly debated in academic circles.⁵⁴ Luckily for us, we may again turn to the concepts of the proponents of *Rezeptionsästhetik* for help. Even though the models of reception theory in general do not deny the author his part in the construction of meaning, the writer's objectives are in the end irrelevant to its methods. Artistic intention exists; it influences and shapes texts and objects and in this manner limits the number of interpretations that can be attributed to them. Even so, it is always the painting or poem itself that determines the reactions of its readers and viewers; it is their idea about the author's intention that plays the key part in understanding a work – never the artist's actual intent. Accordingly, Bronzino himself must be taken into account in our research in so far as he is a part of the cultural context that sets the perimeters of our conclusions regarding the beholder's interaction with his portrait.⁵⁵ The second matter to be tackled concerns the question of the spectator's subjectivity; how can we know for certain that our reconstruction of the viewer's reactions to Bronzino's painting is in any way sound, when it is after all a guaranteed fact that every beholder responds to an art work differently at various moments? In

⁵² Kemp 1992 (22).

⁵³ Kemp 1992 (22): 'Die Rezeptionsästhetik hat [...] (mindestens) drei Aufgaben: (1) Sie muss die Zeichen und Mittel erkennen, mit denen das Kunstwerk in Kontakt zu uns tritt; sie muss sie lesen im Hinblick (2) auf ihre sozialgeschichtliche und (3) auf ihre eigentlich ästhetische Aussage.'

⁵⁴ Rijser 2012 (246).

⁵⁵ One might argue that, until modern times, the creation of a work of art was affected by the intention of the patron rather than that of the artist and that Bronzino should therefore be left out of the picture in our upcoming analysis. Two arguments may be offered in response to this objection. First of all, as we have no idea who commissioned Cosimo's portrait, the artist himself is the closest we can get to the driving force behind our painting. Secondly, the artists of sixteenth-century Italy were surely not thought of as mere servants who provided material on request without imbuing it with at least a small quantity of their own creative ideas: see, among others, Cat. Frankfurt am Main 2016 (1) for the self-consciousness of mannerist art and artists.

this case, we cannot but allow for a certain degree of speculation.⁵⁶ Be that as it may, we must in some way warrant the credibility of our conclusions. Once again, we might find a solution to our problem in the realm of literary science. In the twentieth-century discussion regarding the position of text and reader, scholarship in the field was focused on two questions. On the one hand, academics had to confront the issue of the work's authority vis-à-vis the flexibility of its meaning: 'If the text contains the solution, why do so many experts disagree about its interpretation?'⁵⁷ On the other, they were faced with the problem of consensus: if there is no intended meaning in a work at all, how can it be that so many interpreters agree about its implications? At long last, scholars found the answer to such questions in the idea of an interpretive community: a group of readers that understand texts in the same way because they share experiences and values and therefore employ similar interpretational tactics.⁵⁸ This is the explanation for the stability of interpretation among different readers and spectators; disagreements obviously occur when interpreting subjects belong to distinct groups of beholders. What we need to do to justify our final findings, then, is reconstruct the presumptions and notions of the community to which our painting's implied viewers belonged.⁵⁹

Keeping in mind the notions of which our conceptual framework is composed, we may now finally begin to define a set-up for this thesis. In order to find out in what way an awareness of Bronzino's *rime in burla* can clarify our reading of Cosimo's portrait, we will employ a twofold approach. Part of our research will consist of an analysis of the representational strategies Bronzino employs in his poems. Our main effort, however, shall lie in reconstructing the ideological and cultural ideas with which the contemporary spectator would have approached the portrait. The main part of this essay, then, will focus on an exploration of both the aesthetic and socio-cultural contexts relevant to our painting. The latter shall be the object of our scrutiny in the following chapter; the former, including a brief semiotic analysis of Bronzino's burlesques, will be discussed in the third section of this paper.

⁵⁶ Compare Rijser 2012 (xv-xvi): 'The reconstruction of such interaction must, of course, always remain conjectural, for the contact with works of art and the significance these engendered were to be performed by the viewer every time s/he was confronted with that work, and differently by different viewers.'

⁵⁷ Rijser 2012 (248).

⁵⁸ The concept was coined by Stanley Fish in 1973; see Fish 1980 (167-173).

⁵⁹ This also includes Bronzino himself, for, according to Fish 1980 (171), within the interpretive community, texts and paintings are both understood and created. Not only does the work of art control the response; the same interpretational strategies functional when a viewer beholds it, fashioned it in the first place. Hence, as was already established, Bronzino himself cannot be left out of account in our upcoming analysis.

II: An artist and his Merry Men

During the period between the first expulsion of the Medici in 1494 and Cosimo's instatement as sovereign in 1537, Florence's age-old cultural primacy steadily faded away. On account of economic and political crises, as well as some ravaging plagues and invasions, countless artists and intellectuals fled the city in pursuit of asylum or work. This long-term scarcity of educated natives especially had an advantageous effect on those less privileged yet talented citizens who stayed in Florence during its hardships.⁶⁰ In the years prior to Cosimo's appointment, men who had not received a traditional humanistic schooling filled the vacuum caused by the city's intellectual exodus. First and foremost among these *nouveaux savants* happened to be Bronzino. By 1537, he was already a prominent member of Florence's new *litterati* and when a policy of repatriating artists spurred a wealth of cultural activity in the city after Cosimo had taken over power, our painter was at the hub of the action. It was this socio-cultural context in which Cosimo's portrait was created and in which our interpretive community may consequently be found. As we shall attempt to reconstruct this background in the ensuing chapter, we will, for reasons of conciseness, limit our attention to those protagonists that most likely played a significant part in the reception of our painting. From a short account of Bronzino himself in the first paragraph – it has, after all, been determined that our artist cannot be disregarded in our analysis – we shall proceed to deal with the cultural network of which he was such an important member. Cosimo's attitudes towards the arts and Florence's cultural and intellectual community will be the focus of this chapter's third and final section.

Painter-poet and dedicated friend: Bronzino's life and activities

Our biographical information about Bronzino can hardly be called abundant.⁶¹ From the facts known to us, we can gather that he was born on the seventeenth of November in the year 1503 as Agnolo di Cosimo di Mariano in one of Florence's suburbs. As the son of a butcher he was of modest descent. Early on in his life he showed a distinct talent for drawing. Once he was trained in the fundamentals of painting by an unknown artist, he obtained a short apprenticeship with Raffaellino del Garbo.⁶² Around his fifteenth birthday he took up residence in the studio of Jacopo Pontormo; here he had gained a degree of autonomy as a collaborator by 1520.⁶³ It was about ten years later that his career as a successful painter of portraits positively took off.⁶⁴ His literary activities almost certainly

⁶⁰ Parker 2000 (15-16).

⁶¹ Parker 2000 (7): 'The few facts we possess about the painter's life derive from Vasari's brief *Life* of Bronzino, from letters, and from archival documents dealing with artistic commissions.'

⁶² Raffaellino del Garbo (1466-1527) was a pupil of Filippino Lippi who worked in both Florence and Rome.

⁶³ Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1556) was one of Florence's most important artists and is usually considered as one of the first exponents of mannerist painting.

⁶⁴ Brock 2002 (13): at this point, we also see his nickname attested for the first time.

commenced during this period too.⁶⁵ As an artist, he enjoyed his most fruitful years after Cosimo selected him as court portraitist in the early 1540s. According to Vasari, the Duke's recognition of Bronzino's talents was prompted by the polished stylishness of his works. It may, however, also have been a simple matter of availability: Bronzino was one of the few painters left in Florence at the time.⁶⁶ In any case, the artist's luck, together with his high production rates, kept on continuing until 1555, in which year he was replaced by Giorgio Vasari as the supervisor of the decorations of the Palazzo Vecchio. Nevertheless, Bronzino would remain a painter until his death in 1572.

Vasari describes Bronzino as a kind and courteous friend. Although the reliability of the biographer as to our artist's personality has been questioned, several other sources regarding the painter portray him as an extremely sympathetic and highly social individual as well.⁶⁷ With regard to domestic matters, he appears to have lived a plain and tranquil existence: he was not married and never begot any children. Various events do, however, bear witness to the artist's unwavering commitment to a self-chosen family.⁶⁸ With Pontormo, he seems to have maintained what might be defined as a father-and-son relationship: master and pupil allegedly enjoyed each other's company so much that they stayed in close contact until Pontormo's death.⁶⁹ Bronzino's friendship with an armorer by the name of Cristofano Allori was so warm that the painter eventually moved into his household. After his friend died in 1541, Bronzino adopted the part of head and guardian of the Allori family until he would pass away himself. That the artist was an appreciated member of the literary circles of sixteenth-century Florence too, is attested by many kind-hearted letters as well as the fact that a lot of his commissions were issued by poets and intellectuals. Apparently, the world of writing held a special appeal for Bronzino – yet how much he actually valued it was understood only recently.

The poet

While Vasari identifies Bronzino as the finest writer of burlesques of his age and highly praises the fanciful character of his comic poetry, he never presents his literary pursuits as more than a mere hobby. In the same way, the fact that our painter's verses were never completely issued in print has led most modern art historians to consider his poetic genius as secondary to his artistic skill.⁷⁰ In

⁶⁵ Parker 2000 (7-9).

⁶⁶ Cropper 2004 (4-7): with the exception of a three-year gap from 1530 to 1533 in which Bronzino travelled to northern Italy, both he and Pontormo – contrary to most other artists – stayed in the city in the face of revolutions and plagues.

⁶⁷ For thoughts on the trustworthiness of Vasari one may turn to Pilliod 2001 (9) and Cropper 2004 (4).

⁶⁸ Brock 2002 (13-14).

⁶⁹ Natali 2010 (38): this powerful bond even showed in Bronzino's paintings. His early works in particular tend to be so similar to Pontormo's that the authorship of some pictures is still debated today.

⁷⁰ Brock 2002 (7): '[Bronzino's] sonnets were published at the beginning of the nineteenth century.' The artist's *rime in burla* were put to print only in 1988 by Franca Petrucci Nardelli.

recent years, however, compelling material was put forward indicating that Bronzino wanted to be an acknowledged writer as much as he desired to be an esteemed painter.⁷¹ First of all, it was said, the fact that the artist's poems were never fully put in book form does not mean his contemporaries were not familiar with them: 'Though [Bronzino] published almost nothing during his lifetime, this was only because, in accordance with custom of the time, his poetic compositions were intended for a restricted rather than a wide public and only circulated in handwritten form to friends and acquaintances.'⁷² That Bronzino's verses were indeed well-known and loved amongst literary and artistic circles is definitely suggested by references to his poetry by others: Vasari's admiration was already mentioned and Benedetto Varchi, one of the most influential authors and linguists of Cinquecento Italy, not only equates the artist with the fabled painter Apelles, he also likens him to Apollo, the god and patron of poetry.⁷³ That Bronzino did not regard his literary creations as ordinary trifles is further demonstrated by the sheer quantity of his poems: his extant works comprise no less than 230 Petrarchan sonnets, eleven lengthy satirical odes and 39 bulky burlesque compositions.⁷⁴

Bronzino's fascination for poetry was not just limited to its creation. Whilst the question whether the artist knew Latin has not been conclusively answered, it may be inferred from a number of sources that he was surely an avid reader of vernacular works.⁷⁵ His excellent literary knowledge is alluded to in various documents; in a letter to Bronzino and the sculptor Niccolò Tribolo, Varchi reveals that Bronzino knew all of Dante's works and a major part of Petrarch's writings by heart as early as 1539. The artist's erudition did apparently not diminish over the years; as we learn from an entry in his diary, Pontormo could still lose a bet to the painter regarding a Petrarchan passage in 1555.⁷⁶ Such testimonies, as well as Bronzino's many portraits of learned men and women already mentioned above, seem to indicate clearly that poetry not only played a vital part in our artist's career, but also permeated his social calendar to a significant extent. To end with, the history of the painter's involvement in the Accademia degli Umidi also exemplifies the value he attached to his literary pursuits; when, in 1547, he was expelled from the institution in the light of a reformation, he appears to have been genuinely upset.⁷⁷ When the opportunity of returning was presented by writing a poem that could pass the approval of the academy's censors, Bronzino was the only one to take advantage

⁷¹ The first and most thorough account was given by Brock 2002.

⁷² Brock 2002 (7).

⁷³ Parker 2000 (15).

⁷⁴ Parker 2000 (14); Brock 2002 (9).

⁷⁵ Gaston 1991 (259): his poetry does not conclusively reveal whether or not Bronzino was proficient in Latin. The regular words and short phrases he employs could have been found in every common textbook. For more thoughts on this question see Brock 2002 (10) and Cropper 2004 (15).

⁷⁶ The documents are discussed by Parker 2000 (16-17).

⁷⁷ Brock 2002 (13).

of it; in 1566 he was reinstated upon the presentation of three *canzoni* in honour of Cosimo I.⁷⁸ The fortunes of the Accademia will be discussed in the second paragraph of this chapter; first, however, let us consider what Bronzino's love of letters meant for his visual works of art.

The painter

Given the fact that he thought of writing as far from being a leisurely pursuit, it is not surprising that Bronzino was also a fervent promoter of the dogma of *ut pictura poesis*; the idea of a link between painting and poetry figures repeatedly in his verses.⁷⁹ Whether the artist applied the concept to his pictures as well is a question that hopefully will be answered in the conclusion of this thesis. With regard to the matter, however, it may be worth mentioning that a number of his paintings notably seem to stress the interconnectedness of the other disciplines of art. In this respect, the artist was undoubtedly influenced by his literary liaisons as well, for his acts appear to be deeply rooted in the *paragone*: the ongoing early-modern discussion concerning the superiority of the arts.

Bronzino was officially involved in the *paragone* by Benedetto Varchi in 1547. As part of his preparation of two lectures to be delivered in the literary academy on the second and third Sundays of Lent, the scholar had asked some of his acquaintances – these included our artist – about their opinion on the comparative status of painting and sculpture.⁸⁰ Although Bronzino's answer seems to lean towards the superiority of the former, he leaves his letter to Varchi unfinished.⁸¹ However, as was suggested by Mendelsohn, he may have attempted to settle the matter in pigment rather than text. Shortly after Varchi gave his lectures, the artist executed a portrait of Morgante, a dwarf entertainer at Cosimo's court (figure 10-11). The canvas was two-sided, showing both the front and rear view of the figure's body, and could as a result be observed from different angles so that it could function so to say as a statue in-the-round. Thus, Bronzino seems to usurp for painting sculpture's most frequently invoked asset in the contest over supremacy: the capacity to represent figures three-dimensionally.⁸² It was recently observed that the subject of the *paragone* is also addressed in other works by the painter even well before the matter was brought to his attention by Varchi.⁸³

⁷⁸ Parker 2000 (7-9); Brock 2002 (13).

⁷⁹ Gaston 1991 (262); Falciani 2010 (284-285).

⁸⁰ Mendelsohn 1982 (93): the artists solicited also included Michelangelo, Pontorno and Cellini.

⁸¹ Cropper 2010 (23): Bronzino's letter was edited and published by Barocchi in 1960.

⁸² Mendelsohn 1982 (151): similar demonstration paintings were in fact produced copiously during the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

⁸³ Cat. Florence 2010: the topic was identified in the portrait of a young man with a lute (no. V.3; created around 1533) and in the portraits of Saint John the Baptist and Saint Cosmas (II.4-5, both produced between 1543 and 1545). See further Falciani 2010 (281) for references to the *paragone* in the Panciatichi *Christ Crucified* and Collareta 2010 for thoughts on the role of the debate in several other of Bronzino's works.

It may be clear from this overview of Bronzino's life and pursuits that our painter was a dedicated and respected participant in the artistic and literary society that took shape in Florence during the early years of the sixteenth century. In our attempt to establish the ideal spectator of the Duke's portrait, then, it may be helpful to study this community of learned associates somewhat closer.

Bronzino and his *amica schiera*

The cultural society in which Bronzino moved seems to have been outlined predominantly by groups of friends and acquaintances sharing similar interests and gathering together in so-called *brigata* and *compagnie*. Though the latter was rather more ceremonial than the former, both institutions were closely connected to the celebration of the Carnival season, during which their members revelled in composing highly capricious and ambiguous *canti* sung during street parades.⁸⁴ As one would expect considering our artist's gregariousness, Bronzino was involved in a variety of such brotherhoods.⁸⁵ One fraternity in particular, however, seems to have been key in the shaping of his literary talent.

As we learn from a 1590 dialogue by Alessandro Allori, the son of Cristofano Allori and as such a member of Bronzino's extended family, the painter habitually met with his friends Luca Martini and Benedetto Varchi to discuss paragraphs from Dante's *Commedia*.⁸⁶ Together with a few others, this trio had formed a *brigata* that was most likely more text-oriented than usual; our artist occasionally labels it as an *amica schiera*, a Petrarchan expression commonly used to refer to a literary clique.⁸⁷ It appears that Varchi was the pivot around which this group of friends revolved. Though the scholar was to spend a substantial part of his lifespan beyond the borders of Florence – he had taken part in the uprising against Cosimo in 1537 and had gone into voluntary exile after the rebels had been defeated – it is revealed by his letters that the ties with his home-based companions were never decisively broken.⁸⁸ Moreover, as a result of the many scholarly contacts he picked up on all sides during his travels, he came to be a crucial character in Italy's intellectual goings-on, acting as an intermediary between academics throughout the peninsula. Accordingly, it is not surprising that, after his return to Florence in 1543 as part of Cosimo's repatriation project, he became central to the municipality's cultural revival.⁸⁹ Though Varchi's main activity in the field of literature was writing

⁸⁴ Consult Samuels 1976 (607) for a short characterisation of *brigata*. For a more detailed description of the nature and function of the Florentine *compagnie* one may turn to Pilliod 2001 (81-95).

⁸⁵ Pilliod 2001 (211): Bronzino was a member of the confraternities of Saint Cecilia and San Bastiano.

⁸⁶ Parker 2000 (16-17).

⁸⁷ Kirkham 2006 (43); Petrarch uses the expression when, in one of his poems, he grieves over the troop of friends he must abandon when setting out on a journey to Avignon (*Rime Sparse* 139.2). The word *schiera* reappears in a lament on a departed colleague whom the poet believes to be in the heavenly company of other deceased writers (*Rime Sparse* 287.11).

⁸⁸ Parker 2000 (16); for an account of Varchi's life and career one may consult Pirotti 1971 (1-61).

⁸⁹ Mendelsohn 1982 (3-5).

sonnets in the manner of Petrarch – Bronzino regularly exchanged poems with him – he is also said to have composed several burlesque texts as well as a small number of Carnival songs.⁹⁰

Apart from Benedetto Varchi, a few other members of Bronzino's *amica schiera* are certainly worthy of being referred to at this point. Our painter's close relationship with Luca Martini was already mentioned above; it is not only demonstrated by Allori's manuscript, but also by the fact that the artist immortalised him in a picture (figure 12). Other friends undoubtedly part of Bronzino's company include Antonfrancesco Grazzini, better known as Il Lasca, and Ugolino Martelli, whose likeness our painter also captured in one of his many portraits (figure 13). Giovanni della Casa, Francesco Berni and Giovanni Mazzuoli – his nickname was Lo Stradino – also belonged to this circle. Bronzino was in the habit of exchanging poetry with Luca Martini and Il Lasca.⁹¹ That he was also influenced and inspired by his other acquaintances, however, can hardly be disputed; all of them were occupied with writing sexually explicit and cleverly equivocal burlesques.⁹² Many of the individuals in Bronzino's clique were also a member of, or strongly tied to, the Accademia degli Umidi. Il Lasca and Lo Stradino were among the society's founders and primary leaders, the latter's house even serving as a meeting place for the club's gatherings.⁹³ Luca Martini was inaugurated as a member when the club was still in its preparatory stage and though Varchi and Ugolino Martelli were never officially inducted into the brotherhood, they were in many ways closely connected to its original adherents.⁹⁴ For this reason, looking further into the Accademia degli Umidi appears to be the most obvious next step in our investigation. In doing so, we will, in addition, automatically come across the subject of Cosimo, the third and final factor in the interpretation of our portrait.

The Accademia degli Umidi

The founders of the Umidi were by no means pioneers; the idea of an academy focusing on the art of writing was in all likelihood derived from the lay confraternities and literary *brigade* that had spread across Italy during the first decades of the Cinquecento.⁹⁵ Academies like these had an enormous impact on the society of their time: 'They spread the fruits of both tradition and innovation to a large audience, and they did so by adopting the *volgare* as their official language.'⁹⁶ In this way, they

⁹⁰ Pirotti 1971 (185-187); for Bronzino's correspondence with Varchi see Parker 2000 (16).

⁹¹ Parker 2000 (16).

⁹² Parker 2000 (18); Cropper 2004 (28-29).

⁹³ Parker 2000 (16).

⁹⁴ Basile 2001 (142); Plaisance 2004 (11).

⁹⁵ Samuels 1976 (624): the most prominent were those of Padua and Siena. Varchi was a member of the Accademia degli Infiammati in Padua and may as such have encouraged his fellow countrymen in Florence to establish an academy of their own. Consult Plaisance 1973 (363-381) and Samuels 1976 for a discussion of these and other academies.

⁹⁶ Samuels 1976 (599).

enabled those who had not been classically educated to join in the pleasures of intellectual discourse and find a platform for their own inspired creations. It was precisely this sort of fellowship that the authors of the Umidi sought for – even if their ambitions appeared to be comparatively unassuming.

The Accademia degli Umidi was erected rather spontaneously on November first in the year 1540.⁹⁷ On that night, some dozen men casually convened in the dwelling of Lo Stradino in Florence's Via San Gallo. The majority were of the merchant class and all of those present shared a particular interest in the *studia humanitatis*. At some point in their get-together they agreed to meet up with each other on a more regular basis and devised plans to turn their assembly into a somewhat structured institution. Two weeks later, on the fourteenth of November, the group of comrades gathered again and decided on their name. Whilst it has been argued that the designation *Umidi* – the Italian word for *moist* – was meant to hint at a proposed rivalry with the Accademia degli Infiammati in Padua, the society's members' penchant for erotically charged poetry may suggest that the term was more likely chosen for its sexual connotations: 'Adjectives referring to humidity and dampness were associated with the female genitalia and vaginal intercourse.'⁹⁸ To be sure, the label *Accademia* seems to have been rather intended as an ironic jest than conveying a solemn resolution; although, on paper, the Umidi's purpose was to seriously study and earnestly foster the Tuscan vernacular, the organisation's members originally appear to have composed and analysed poetry for entertainment purposes only.⁹⁹ Contemporaries described them as a ludic and lively group, always liable to jokes and pranks.¹⁰⁰ In view of this free democratic character, which was even officially laid down in the society's statutes, it seems only fitting that the organisational makeup of the Umidi was trimmed down to basics, with only four management posts rotating every two months.

Unfortunately for its adherents, the happy-go-lucky outlook of the Umidi ended up to be extremely short-lived. As membership of the Umidi was not limited to a restricted group of friends, outsiders with differing viewpoints and intentions were able to encroach upon the society fairly easily. Already in the first month of its existence, four of Cosimo's supporters were welcomed into the institution's ranks. The admission of the quartet may have been prompted by vanity; early documents recounting the Umidi's doings suggest that the amateur academics felt honoured to be noticed by such

⁹⁷ The most extensive accounts of the society's history – and its subsequent transformation into the Accademia Fiorentina – were given by Michel Plaisance and Claudia Di Filippo Bareggi in 1973. A more recent, though slightly less lengthy, report was included in Domenico Zanrè's 2004 publication. My exploration of the subject in this and the following paragraph is largely based on their work.

⁹⁸ Zanrè 2004 (15-16)

⁹⁹ Plaisance 1973 (387); Mendelsohn 1982 (25); Parker 1997 (1018).

¹⁰⁰ Mendelsohn 1982 (25).

important and influential citizens.¹⁰¹ Another reason, however, may be found in the original Umidi's lack of proficiency in philosophy and linguistics – a gap the new-found associates filled.¹⁰² Whatever the motivation for the instatement, the arrival of these individuals instantly brought about an organisational alteration in the form of a new directorial position. It would prove to be the initial step towards what appears to have been a covert coup d'état contrived by the new government.

The Accademia Fiorentina

Whereas there is no obvious reason to look for ulterior motives in the first intrusion of Cosimo's cohorts into the Accademia degli Umidi, the events of the following months certainly seem to cast the affair in a dubious light. On Christmas day 1540, the enrolment of two new members by the names of Pier Francesco Giambullari and Cosimo Bartoli, both fervent supporters of the Duke's new regime, launched a period of reformation that would see its conclusion in February the next year. On the eleventh day of that month, a committee assembled by this duo presented a list of revised statutes of which it was expressly said they tied in with Cosimo's personal desires. The decree not only contained new regulations and protocols; the academy's orientation was rigorously modified too. Rather than doing some reading and composing the occasional poem, the society's members were henceforth required to devote themselves primarily to the study of scientific texts. Besides that, it was established that weekly seminars should be held in Santa Maria Novella's Sala del Papa; the lectures to be delivered there would form the organisation's new core activity.¹⁰³ As a final point, the amendments dictated that two censors were to be appointed to watch over the literary output of the academy's members. Although this decree was completely at odds with the Umidi's democratic spirit – up to this point the society's censorship had been collectively carried out by letting each and every one of its members speak its mind openly and unreservedly – its original adherents voted in favour of the new statutes almost unanimously.¹⁰⁴ Maybe they were pressurised or dared not defy Cosimo in the open, though several documents seem to suggest they were as yet simply oblivious to the Duke's presumably true intentions.¹⁰⁵ In any event, the Umidi did resist a proposal to rechristen their organisation the Accademia Fiorentina. This protest, however, was merely symbolic, for the motion was not even put to a vote.¹⁰⁶ The expansion of the academy's goals was accompanied by an

¹⁰¹ Di Filippo Bareggi 1973 (531).

¹⁰² Plaisance 2004 (12).

¹⁰³ It is noteworthy that, as said by Plaisance 2004 (13), soon after the new statutes were implemented, the Sala del Papa was adorned with a portrait of Cosimo. While it is surely tempting to believe that this work was in fact the very painting we are investigating, it is not the goal of this thesis to verify this assumption. Nevertheless, should we conclude that our portrait has an obvious connection to Bronzino's literary activities, this hypothesis would definitely be worth exploring.

¹⁰⁴ Plaisance 1973 (409): only Il Lasca voted against.

¹⁰⁵ Plaisance 1973 (408-409); Zanrè 2004 (19).

¹⁰⁶ Plaisance 1973 (409); Mendelsohn 1982 (25).

enlargement of its numbers; during the period of reformation, more and more men from Cosimo's faction came to join the society. On the same day the reforms were accepted, 42 new members entered the club. This group included a majority of artists; Bronzino was among them as well.

The new statutes were to take effect from the 25th of March. Until that moment, an interim council was chosen to govern the academy. A handful of its original leaders got nominated for postings, perhaps to smooth over their reluctant integration into what was in fact to be, as they now began to realise, a completely new organisation. After the implementation of its first major changes, the society grew again; on the 31st of March no less than seventy-four initiates signed up. In addition, the academy's configuration was altered once again with the creation of various new commanding positions. The society's founding fathers only occupied two of them – and lowly ones at that. Bit by bit, the Umidi saw their free-spirited and playful fraternity disintegrating as its laidback feel was constrained and the organisation was subjected to strict rules and a formal code of behaviour.¹⁰⁷

The reforms initiated by Cosimo's sponsors inevitably led to a lot of discontent amongst the original Umidi, as can be inferred from documents, sonnets and letters written by them soon after.¹⁰⁸ As a result, during these early years, the academy was faced with a progressively widening gulf between the two opposing parties; whereas the earliest members and their adherents tended to occupy themselves mainly with the popular and more earthy literary genres – first and foremost the burlesque – and were not necessarily supporters of the regime, their rivals were generally pro-Medici and would brand the Umidi's poetry as disgraceful and vulgar.¹⁰⁹ For years, chaos and quarrels were the order of the day within the organisation – until Cosimo decided to take radical measures. In 1547, the Accademia Fiorentina was officially terminated. The next week, it reopened. At that point, however, the Umidi and their friends, along with virtually all artists, were excluded from re-entry.¹¹⁰ On top of that, new structural changes and rules made sure that the new academy absolutely tallied with the tight bureaucratic system Cosimo had developed.¹¹¹ In this way, the regime eventually succeeded in creating a uniform environment that utterly conformed to governmental demands.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Mendelsohn 1982 (25).

¹⁰⁸ Zanrè 2004 (18-36).

¹⁰⁹ Parker 2003 (232).

¹¹⁰ Only Michelangelo was allowed to return.

¹¹¹ Zanrè 2004 (21): 'In this sense, the claim that the Academy had been incorporated slowly but surely into the machinery of the *Stato fiorentino* as a cultural adjunct does not seem an exaggerated one.'

¹¹² Since the production date of our portrait falls within the early years of the academy's existence, we will end our account of its development here. For the subsequent history of the organisation, one may consult Plaisance and Zanrè 2004.

With regard to Bronzino, the image sketched out here may seem a bit paradoxical. The painter was closely associated with the first members of the Umidi, a group of friends that, by the looks of it, had republican sentiments and did not wholeheartedly accept Cosimo's patronage of their club. Yet, soon after the society's transformation, our artist became the Duke's court painter. To make sense of this, it may be helpful to examine Cosimo's part in the academy's reform and his attitude towards the arts in general more closely; as we will see, things are not as straightforward as they might appear.

The power of leniency: Cosimo and the arts

When Cosimo was appointed as Florence's new leader, he was a seventeen-year-old lad exclusively interested in the usual woodland diversions of the nobility. He had never harboured any ambition to rule and whereas his forefathers had been famous for their fondness of art – both Cosimo il Vecchio and his grandson Lorenzo had been great supporters of the artists of their era, with the latter even composing poetry himself – to the young lord it meant next to nothing. With the laws and principles of painting he was not the least bit familiar, nor did he have any flair for artistic literary expression.¹¹³ Despite this lack of experience with all things political and artistic, Cosimo turned out to possess an extraordinary talent to establish his power by making strategic use of his cultural resources. It may even be said that arts policy came to be a crucial factor in the machinery of the soon-to-be duchy.

Cosimo's cultural agenda

As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Florence was an artistic and cultural wasteland at the time Cosimo was instated. It is testimony to the young man's apparent determination to restore Florence to its age-old grandeur, that, within several years of his ascent to power, he managed to charm the fled *litterati* and artists into returning homeward again. At the same time, he launched a policy of lively support of the arts; under the pretext of converting Florence into the cultural pivot of Italy once more, an all-embracing propaganda campaign was launched, designed to heighten the Medici's standing and strengthen the new government's power.¹¹⁴ Naturally, the most conspicuous domain in which this policy became visible was that of the visual arts.¹¹⁵ For our purposes, however, the seemingly carefully orchestrated and apparently systematic infiltration and takeover of the Accademia degli Umidi is of much greater interest. While it was probably the Umidi's

¹¹³ For Cosimo's passion for hunting in the outdoors instead of reading or studying, his lack of interest in the arts and his markedly plain and matter-of-fact jargon, see Cochrane 1973.

¹¹⁴ Forster 1971 (102): 'This propaganda embraced everything, from diplomacy to linguistics and history-writing, from portraiture to new institutions, from public ceremonies to the decorations of Cosimo's private quarters. Ducal sponsorship of the *accademie*, the efforts to bring the bodies of famous artists to rest in Florence and the funerary ceremony permitted for Michelangelo in San Lorenzo demonstrate the special importance Cosimo attached to the political function of the arts.' See also Ricci 2001 (103).

¹¹⁵ This field has been extensively studied by many scholars, most notably Forster 1971 and Van Veen 2006.

independent spirit that fairly quickly attracted the attention of Cosimo, it is also highly likely that the emphasis they had put upon the vernacular exerted a powerful pull on the young Duke.¹¹⁶ The Tuscan dialect was to play a vital part in his attempt to regain Florence's cultural authority and to bolster Medicean hegemony; by promoting the *volgare* through the translation of classical scientific texts and original writings, Cosimo was able to put an end to the long-established elitist universities' monopoly of knowledge.¹¹⁷ A further effect of his avid endorsement of the vernacular was that interest in the more imperialist-inclined written works of Tuscany was fostered at the expense of the predominantly republican literature of the classical period.¹¹⁸ In addition to such cultural concerns, the Duke's meddling in the Umidì may also have been inspired by practical motivations. Surely, the academy's enforced shift of focus from poetry to scientific texts reflects Cosimo's plans to rebuild his city: 'The Accademia became a tool of the new regime, partly to glorify Cosimo but also to form the professional class that would govern the territorial state. To help these professionals develop the duchy, academicians translated into the *volgare* practical Latin treatises in the fields of geometry, hydraulics, and architecture.'¹¹⁹ Whatever the main reason for Cosimo's interfering with the literary community may have been, it is certain that the Accademia Fiorentina in the end came to be one of the propagandistic arms of his rule; once the new lord had ensured that the institution's output would both cultivate the Tuscan dialect and glorify the Medici family, he took the final step to what definitely looks like literary dominion by establishing an efficient means of dissemination. In 1547, the official printing press of Lorenzo Torrentino was opened for business. Unsurprisingly, its publications for the largest part consisted of scientific essays and treatises in the vernacular.¹²⁰

To all appearances, the Accademia Fiorentina was nothing more than a form of state-controlled censorship on the entirety of literary production. As a consequence, most scholars follow Michel Plaisance, a long-standing authority on the subject, in underlining the dictatorial nature of Cosimo's arts policy and regarding the transformation of the Accademia degli Umidì as an autocratic attempt

¹¹⁶ Zanrè 2004 (16): 'Cosimo was still occupied with consolidating his control; any grouping or body of men that met together in the city without supervision could pose a potential threat to the security of the government. This was the reason behind the decree of 1537 which forbade mass meetings without prior authorisation. The regular gatherings of the Umidì could therefore not be ignored.'

¹¹⁷ While the sweeping matter of the *questione della lingua* does not lie within the scope of this thesis, it is interesting to note in this context that the later academy's discord was to a great extent prompted by it. As Zanrè 2004 (37) points out: '[Giambullari, Bartoli, Lenzoni and Gelli – four of Cosimo's supporters to enter the academy at an early stage] were the leading figures in an intellectual group that came to be known as the *Aramei*. Giambullari had maintained that the *lingua volgare* had developed from ancient Hebrew or Aram and thus refuted the generally accepted Latin derivation of the vernacular.'

¹¹⁸ Watt 2001 (128); Ricci 2001 (113).

¹¹⁹ Davies 2009 (64); see also Plaisance 1973 (406).

¹²⁰ Ricci 2001 (111-112): 'The preponderance of vernacular titles reflects, beyond general trends in contemporary publishing, [Torrentino's] specific function within the cultural machinery of the ducal regime.'

to construct a uniform cultural community, the members of which the new ruler could cherry-pick and control.¹²¹ In its turn, this idea has yielded the conviction that those literary works not in keeping with the government's rules and demands were automatically outlawed. Moreover, on account of the republican sentiments entertained by many of its original members, the Umidi in particular have been regarded as a kind of protest group passively resisting Cosimo's novel leadership.¹²² Recently, however, this outlook has been modified in favour of what has been called a notion of negotiated power. According to this point of view, Cosimo, rather than imposing an absolute literary hegemony from above, as a matter of fact allowed for dissident activities in order to construct the cultural mainstream – what is more, he even relied on such actions so as to set the limits of acceptability.¹²³ Apart from this, the degree of Cosimo's personal engagement in artistic affairs has been convincingly questioned.¹²⁴ That it was in truth not the young Duke's intention to put in force an autocratic cultural domination seems indeed to be indicated by a number of factors and events.

A cultural polder model

In January 1556, Cosimo's secretary Lorenzo Pagni sent his master two letters in which he expressed his concern over a group of *litterati* known as the Pianigiani; members of the unofficial Accademia del Piano founded by noted republican Iacopo Pitti.¹²⁵ Like the Umidi, the Pianigiani were essentially playful in spirit and as such keenly devoted to lampooning the customs of state institutions and the church. It was this mockery of distinguished citizens and traditions, in fact a conventional element of Carnival revels, that greatly bothered the Ducal clerk. Cosimo, however, was not the least bit flustered by the affair; as long as they would not conduct themselves in an indecent manner, or get in the way of government business, the Pianigiani, so he replied, would be fully allowed to vent their emotions and let off some steam. This incident seems to suggest that the cultural policy of the Medici regime was not as largescale as it appeared; evidently, slightly rebellious activities were tolerated and informally recognised as part of Florence's quintessentially cheerful and unruly nature. Apart from the Accademia del Piano, the city accordingly housed a number of literary associations that did not conform to the officially sanctioned cultural milieu. After they were ousted from the formal body of poetic production, the Umidi, for instance, returned to the structure of their original *brigata*, composing festival songs in a casual setting.¹²⁶ Furthermore, the domain of the press was not monopolised by Torrentino's state-endorsed company; works not ratified by the Fiorentina – these

¹²¹ Ricci 2001 (113); Zanrè 2004 (15).

¹²² Mendelsohn 1982 (26).

¹²³ Zanrè 2004 (2); Chauvineau 2006.

¹²⁴ Davies 2009 (61-62).

¹²⁵ The activities of the Pianigiani, Pagni's letters and Cosimo's reply to them are discussed by Zanrè 2001. Some of the members of the Accademia del Piano were also affiliated with the Fiorentina.

¹²⁶ Plaisance 1973 (420).

comprised mostly parodies and burlesques – were extensively published by the Giunti. Judged by the number of reprints issued, these writings must have been enormously popular.¹²⁷

Besides the existence of an unofficial realm of literary production, there are several other aspects of Cosimo's reign that seem to support the assertion that dissent and freedom of speech were not utterly rooted out in the Medici duchy and that art was not necessarily intricately linked with politics. The extent to which the Duke was prepared to pardon quite a few wayward and sometimes even seditious actions of some of his cultured citizens, many of whom had openly communicated their republican sentiments or had even joined the uprising in 1537, is striking.¹²⁸ In the pictorial arts, individual creativity was warranted by Cosimo's adoption of a contemporary notion regarding the relationship between artist and patron: '[This theory] made each indispensable to the other but left the latter completely in charge of planning and executing what the former had hired him to do.'¹²⁹ From lectures delivered in the Accademia Fiorentina, lastly, we can infer that deviating opinions, albeit religious ones, were in fact permitted even in government-controlled organisations; heterodox views are candidly conveyed in more than a few speeches of the 1550s.¹³⁰

On account of the arguments expounded in this paragraph, it has been claimed that Florence's intellectual society under Cosimo I was not so much a strictly controlled and meticulously managed environment without any room for free spirits as it was a manifold and lively arena.¹³¹ Evidently, the new leader realised that consenting every so often to mischief was necessary to distract his cultured community from thoughts on its lost political liberty.¹³² Whilst it is true that some of the more significant examples of leniency can be dated to the period in which Cosimo had consolidated his power – he may have found it easier then to turn a blind eye to tomfoolery – the notion that his arts policy was perhaps not as purposely tyrannical as it appears, may shed a different light on his appropriation of the Umedi. To be sure, there are no actual indications that the takeover of the academy was an act of hostility, nor that the Umedi itself was in reality an opposition movement – on the contrary; its members do not seem to have been interested in politics at all.¹³³ Of course some of them had formed part of the group of rebels that took up arms against Cosimo in his first year, but

¹²⁷ Zanrè 2004 (114); the publication of burlesques will be further discussed in the following chapter.

¹²⁸ Two noteworthy examples are *Il Lasca* and *Varchi*.

¹²⁹ Cochrane 1973 (78).

¹³⁰ Cochrane 1973 (78); Brundin 2009 (58-59).

¹³¹ Brundin 2009.

¹³² Zanrè 2001 (197); Brundin 2009 (64).

¹³³ Cochrane 1973 (69); Samuels 1976 (631): 'They welcomed the apparent respite Cosimo had brought from the civil strife, the military interventions, and the consequent social and economic disorder endemic since the end of the previous century.'

this, in all probability, was less a matter of genuine commitment than one of practicality.¹³⁴ In addition, the earliest associates' quiet objections to increasing governmental control were not manifestly motivated by political considerations; Il Lasca, the most fervent protestor, most likely resisted the transformation of his academy primarily on cultural grounds.¹³⁵ Furthermore, some of the Umidi's members and friends in fact maintained close relations with the Duke; Luca Martini might be called one of the most competent bureaucrats to enter Cosimo's service and Lo Stradino had been an ally of the young man's father.¹³⁶ Through the latter, several Umidi had even actively sought the Duke's sponsorship during the first few months of their existence.¹³⁷ On the whole, then, it seems that, rather than becoming the victims of a government-organised coup, the academy's members were fully prepared to surrender their autonomy to the real benefits of ducal patronage, even if, on a conceptual level, they may not have been all that happy with the eventual results.¹³⁸

The account given above allows us to explain the paradox defined in the previous section. Seeing that Cosimo's cultural politics were not as clear-cut and uncompromising as is often thought and that Bronzino's friends were not the outlaws or dissidents they appeared to be, we can easily envision the court artist moving in the cultural circles portrayed in this chapter without being hampered by any political considerations. The strong link between our painter and the literary society of his times, in particular the Umidi, along with his interest in artistic theory and the *paragone*, makes a reading of our portrait in the light of his writing all the more promising. Considering the extent to which Bronzino was involved in literary exegesis and the creation of burlesque poetry, it would only be logical for the painter to apply the procedures he used in his texts to his visual works.¹³⁹ As was announced in the first chapter, these literary techniques will be the focus of the following section.

¹³⁴ Zanrè 2004 (8-9); Varchi, for instance, seems to have pledged his loyalty to whomever enabled him to support himself. For Varchi's pragmatism see Pirotti 1971 (14).

¹³⁵ Brand and Pertile 1996 (225): 'The apothecary Anton Francesco Grazzini (1503-84) remained firmly rooted within the city walls and regarded himself as a guardian of the quintessential burlesque and festive Florentine spirit which had flourished in the Quattrocento.'

¹³⁶ Plaisance 2004 (11); this Giovanni dalle Bande Nere had been a mercenary captain or *condottiero* in the service of Leo X. For Martini's connection to Cosimo see Samuels 1976 (625).

¹³⁷ Plaisance 1973 (396-397); Plaisance 2004 (11).

¹³⁸ Brundin 2009 (57).

¹³⁹ Compare Mendelsohn 1982 (29) on the consequences of the academy's weekly readings on Dante and Petrarch: 'A conscious aim toward popularization played a part in the dissemination of Varchi's ideas on art and artists, to the extent that they came to be reflected in public taste, and to influence works commissioned and programmed by the Academy. [...] The techniques of multilevel readings demonstrated by lecturers and expected of their listeners was extended by patrons and artists to the interpretation of those images painted or sculpted by and for the same audience. It would therefore only be natural for artists to apply these literary techniques to their visual works.'

III: Bronzino's poetics explored

It seems obvious that, in determining the literary *Erwartungshorizont* of any viewer or reader, one should start with an analysis of the aesthetic norms and models underlying the written works of the time. For this reason, we will presently set off with a general exploration of Italian burlesque, looking into the genre's characteristics as well as the traditions of which it derives. An assessment of the status it enjoyed in society will also form part of this section. The second paragraph of this chapter shall zoom in on questions regarding Bronzino's poetic output and methods; in what ways, if any, did our artist distinguish himself from his literary colleagues and what techniques did he employ to imbue his verses with meaning? Unfortunately, a meticulous dissection of his poems lies outside the art-historical scope of this thesis. Still, with the help of the research conducted of his writings, we will be able to get some understanding of the poet's representational strategies. In conclusion to this chapter, the literary and visual strands of our study will finally come together, as we will consider to what extent the findings regarding Bronzino's semiotics can be applied to our portrait.

The *capitolo bernesco*: a local speciality

Today, the word *burlesque* is usually associated with comical variety shows starring scantily clad and flirtatious girls by the likes of Marilyn Monroe. Until halfway through the nineteenth century, however, the term was used to refer to a literary work or play that relied for humorous effect on an incongruity of style and subject matter; in burlesques, the weighty is handled light-hearted while the trivial gets a solemn treatment.¹⁴⁰ The genre's history is old and revered; already in antiquity, it was allegedly cultivated by the most glorious poets.¹⁴¹ As a result, it was inevitably rediscovered during the fifteenth century. Ordinarily, it is Erasmus of Rotterdam who, with his 1511 *Lof der Zotheid*, is credited with the category's final repopularisation. Though the author justifies his undertaking by invoking the illustrious ancient examples of Homer and Virgil, his so-called paradoxical encomium, a special type of usually moralistic burlesque in which a lowly subject is described in an elevated manner, actually had a particular basis in sophism: the ancient philosophic rhetorical practice of presenting hollow arguments with a maximum of virtuosity. Its goal was to draw in its listeners and enthrall them only to let them see the depravity of its subject – and subsequently their own

¹⁴⁰ For a thorough discussion of the genre and its subtypes, the most well-known of which is parody, one may consult Jump 1972.

¹⁴¹ Though *burlesque* does not seem to have come in use as a technical literary term any sooner than the sixteenth century, its typical violation of decorum can be traced back to ancient times. The pseudo-Homeric *Batrachomyomachia*, for example, describes a mock-epic war between frogs and mice. Virgil was credited with the writing of various parodying works in a collection known as the *Appendix Vergiliana*.

foolishness – afterwards.¹⁴² Thus, soon after Erasmus' essay was published, the paradoxical encomium gained an elevated status as entertainment for the well-read; in glorifying the disgraceful and cleverly arguing the untruthful by searching for fresh combinations of words and meanings, intellectuals across Northern Europe found a challenging new diversion.¹⁴³ The merit and dignity of such treatises was ensured by the genre's venerated legacy and its customary didactic quality.

The rediscovery of the paradoxical encomium was by no means an exclusively northern European affair; in Italy, the rhetorical form became tremendously popular too. The Florentines in particular eagerly appropriated the genre. Especially by the hands of Francesco Berni it was transformed and brought to great heights during the 1520s; the author's *Capitoli in terza rima* instantly spawned a new kind of poetry that would remain one of the most ubiquitous literary types for the next thirty years. This so-called *stile bernesco* was first and foremost an indigenous genre.¹⁴⁴ It distinguished itself from the established tradition in two important respects.¹⁴⁵ First of all, the Bernesque *capitolo* only functioned as a humorous distraction; in contrast to the essays of Erasmus and his followers, it never served any didactic or moralising purposes.¹⁴⁶ The most important characteristic of the *stile bernesco*, however, was its erotic ambiguity. To understand why the Tuscan burlesque assumed such a specific appearance as well as to get a more rounded notion of the Bernesque *capitolo* and its characteristics, it is necessary to dip into some of Florence's earlier literary traditions.

From Burchiello to Berni

The most detailed and as yet only substantial study of the development of the *capitolo* was carried out by Jean Toscan in 1978. Although he tentatively traces the genre's origins back to the Middle Ages, he locates the actual first step towards the *stile bernesco* in the fifteenth century. At that time, two poetical currents emerged in which sexual equivocalty played an important part.¹⁴⁷ The first of these movements was founded by Burchiello.¹⁴⁸ Employing the procedures of the paradoxical

¹⁴² For this didactic function of the paradoxical encomium see Longhi 1983 (142-145). The term has also been applied to art: Reindert Falkenburg discovered the pattern in the still lifes of Pieter Aertsen in 1989.

¹⁴³ Longhi 1983 (150).

¹⁴⁴ According to Toscan 1978 (25), the genre's local character is demonstrated by a statement Varchi makes in one of his lectures: 'Ed io porto ferma opinione, che chi non è nato in Firenze, o almeno stato in Firenze assai, non possa in questo genere [bernesco] divenire eccellente.'

¹⁴⁵ The genre's metrical characteristics are for the moment being left out of consideration. For information about *terza rima* one may turn to Longhi 1983 (4) and Brand and Pertile 1996 (161-164; 251-273).

¹⁴⁶ Parker 1997 (1018).

¹⁴⁷ Toscan 1978 (59-60): previously, sexual metaphors had been used only sporadically – and never in the intellectual and playful spirit that would come to exemplify the *capitolo*.

¹⁴⁸ Toscan 1978 (64-84); Talvacchia 2011 (21); Burchiello was born in Florence as Domenico di Giovanni in 1404. In 1434 he fled the city for reasons unknown; by then, however, he had already established a much emulated school of writing.

encomium, he composed parodic and often highly insulting poems centring on the physical aspects of love. Through his wording and themes, the author ridiculed and defied the conventions of highbrow Petrarchan writing.¹⁴⁹ Burchiello's is thus a poetry of rebellion against the literary norms prescribed by the establishment. The sexual double entendres that abound in his verses are put in primarily for this reason; by turning the topoi and diction of lyric poetry into something banal and lewd, the writer disparages the exalted notion of spiritualised love as it was found in Petrarch's sonnets as no more than a basis for laughter.¹⁵⁰ Burchiello's inventions would be refined in the second half of the Cinquecento by Lorenzo de' Medici. By incorporating them into an old but almost worn-out tradition of *canzoni* sung during Carnival celebrations, Lorenzo expanded Burchiello's themes and metaphoric vocabulary into a wholly new genre.¹⁵¹ Contrary to Burchiello's poems, the *Canti Carnascialeschi* composed by Lorenzo did not engage in any literary polemic. Instead, they dealt with the everyday affairs of city life – any ordinary topic, from military to family matters and from utensils to food, being subjected to a broad process of eroticisation.¹⁵²

As may be concluded from our discussion so far, Florence had an endemic tradition of comical poetry from which the burlesque *capitolo* could almost naturally flow forth. Indeed, Francesco Berni's contribution to the genre's development was that he managed to unify the two poetical strands of Burchiello and Lorenzo by taking the latter's licentiousness out of its confined ceremonial context and reuniting it with the literary mockery of the former.¹⁵³ Though he did not stand out for his inventiveness – his themes and vocabulary are in general derived directly from the existing corpus of his predecessors – he surpassed his models to such an extent and pulled together all traditions in such an orderly fashion that in the end he became the paradigm himself. Berni's followers would stick remarkably close to their model; even throughout the seventeenth century, the topics and vocabulary of burlesque poetry would barely undergo any changes. As a consequence, its idiom and subject matter in fact consisted of a highly coded and pre-set linguistic system which its exponents acquired through a methodical and solid process of imitation and emulation.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ Toscan 1978 (64-65).

¹⁵⁰ Toscan 1978 (83).

¹⁵¹ Toscan 1978 (99; 108-109).

¹⁵² Longhi 1983 (84); the topics of Lorenzo's *Canti* often stem from traditions of impish poetry that had their roots in antiquity and were, as it would seem from the many documents in which they are condemned by the church, very popular. See Toscan 1978 (100-116) for an overview of these traditions.

¹⁵³ Toscan 1978 (95); Brand and Pertile 1996 (270).

¹⁵⁴ Toscan 1978 (137); Gaston 2012 (94); see also Longhi 1983 (5-23) for the rigidity of the *capitolo* as opposed to the freedom and flexibility of the Petrarchan sonnet.

Having thus found an answer to our inquiry as to the Bernesque *capitolo*'s distinct character, we may now attempt to draw up a definition of the genre. On account of our discussion of its ancestry, Florence's burlesque may be described as a poetic form loosely modelled on the paradoxical encomium, combining comic realism and pointed parody of contemporary society with sharp caricatures of the lofty and acclaimed Petrarchan sonnet. Most importantly, Bernesque poetry swarms with obscenities and sexual double entendres drawn from a fixed metaphorical lexicon. In consequence, the burlesque *capitolo* is always shifting between two levels of meaning: one literal, the other metaphorical and usually aimed at overstepping the laws of decency.¹⁵⁵ It is not insignificant that most of the genre's imagery refers to the act of sodomy. This may have been a reflection of Florence's state of affairs – though it was hardly accepted practice, buggery had for a long time been a serious problem for the city's authorities – but, as Toscan points out, artistic reasons may have played a part in the topic's popularity as well: 'On peut l'envisager encore comme le dernier degré de la réduction à laquelle à été soumis le concept d'amour [de Pétrarque].'¹⁵⁶ As an ambiguous act, moreover, sodomy perfectly mirrored the equivocal language of the *capitolo*.¹⁵⁷

The status of Bernesque

In contrast to what one may think, the indecorous nature of the *stile bernesco* did not mean it was regarded as a minor or unrefined kind of poetry. Neither was it considered merely an attack on Petrarchism – on the contrary: the burlesque *capitolo* was thought of and valued as a fully-fledged genre in its own right.¹⁵⁸ Its appeal lay not so much in its vulgar subject matter as in the way in which this was presented. Whereas both Burchiello's poems and Lorenzo's *Canti* had solely consisted of a series of erotic innuendoes without any coherence on the literal level, Berni and his followers took care to embed their metaphors into a logical account. Common objects and Petrarchan patterns acquired new sexual connotations by the way in which they were combined with novel notions into a coherent story. This makes the burlesque a highly intelligent type of poetry; its pleasures sprung from the intellectual challenge of attributing unexpected meanings to a known and set vocabulary.¹⁵⁹ This was the *capitolo*'s main and only goal: 'Le contenu de deuxième niveau n'est, réellement, que le prétexte de divertissements rhétoriques, de tours de force verbaux qui sont les véritables raisons d'être du discours.'¹⁶⁰ In what manner this linguistic game was played will be investigated in the

¹⁵⁵ Toscan 1978 (142); Parker 1997 (1019); Talvacchia 2011 (33).

¹⁵⁶ Toscan 1978 (84); for Florence's problems with sodomy, consult Toscan 1978 (91-94 and 187-193) and Simons 1997 (29-32).

¹⁵⁷ Toscan 1978 (245).

¹⁵⁸ Longhi 1983 (243-244).

¹⁵⁹ Toscan 1978 (85-87): correspondingly, Berni refers to his poetry as *fantasia*, the reading and understanding of which primarily demanded intellectual efforts.

¹⁶⁰ Toscan 1978 (142); Longhi 1983 (217-227).

subsequent paragraph. However, before diving deeper into the semiotics of Berni and his followers, we may well have a short look at the way in which their poems were greeted by the community – for in the field of its reception as well we shall detect many clues as to how popular and esteemed Bernesque poetry really was with the upper – if not all – tiers of Florence’s society.

The first printed copy of burlesque poetry consisted of an anthology published by the Giunti press in 1548.¹⁶¹ The popularity of the volume may be measured by the fact that it was reprinted no less than three times over the next seven years.¹⁶² As Silvia Longhi points out, these canonising publications specify the years in which the *capitolo* attained its largest and most widespread readership.¹⁶³ However, the scholar affirms, the poems of Berni and his followers were without a doubt already disseminated either orally or via manuscripts years prior to their publication.¹⁶⁴ This early popularity is unsurprising considering the genre’s descent from the *Canti Carnascialeschi*; not only would all Florentines have been able to relate to the everyday themes alluded to in Bernesque poems, they would also most likely have understood the largest part of the sexual puns.¹⁶⁵ After all, the *Canti* and their wordplay had for decades been part of the communal pre-Lenten rites. Moreover, it is not unlikely that, although burlesque poetry was in the main intended for well-educated individuals, its ties to the Carnival tradition involved public recitals of *capitoli* during the holiday’s celebrations.¹⁶⁶

That the *stile bernesco* was also exceedingly popular amongst the members of the court seems to be confirmed by several testimonies. A couple of Cosimo’s predecessors had been deeply engaged in the genre. The vital part played by Lorenzo il Magnifico has already been mentioned. In addition, it is claimed that his son and later Pope Leo X greatly enjoyed and appreciated the carnivalesque and equivocal spirit of Berni’s poems.¹⁶⁷ Likewise, many courtiers allegedly charged their ambassadors to lay their hands on anything and everything Bernesque and some eminent clerics even knew the poet’s *capitoli* by heart.¹⁶⁸ Whether Cosimo himself was an admirer of Berni’s verse as well, we cannot tell for certain; there is no clear evidence that can either verify or disprove such a claim.

¹⁶¹ Zanrè 2004 (114) draws attention to the fact that the moment of publication, scarcely a year after the purging of the Accademia Fiorentina, is rather remarkable; perhaps it may be interpreted as an act of protest.

¹⁶² The first collection was reprinted in 1550 and 1552. In 1555, a second edition was issued which was supplemented with, among others, five *capitoli* by Bronzino.

¹⁶³ Longhi 1983 (30-31).

¹⁶⁴ See Longhi 1983 (32-56) for testimonia of recitals of Berni’s verses.

¹⁶⁵ Toscan 1978 (106-107).

¹⁶⁶ Parker 1997 (1018): ‘In Bronzino’s day the audience for these works would have included courtiers, secretaries to ecclesiasts, other poets, and statesmen- scholars. Florentines from varying backgrounds would have also had the opportunity of hearing the poems during carnival celebrations, which frequently included public recitals.’ See also Zanrè 2004 (26).

¹⁶⁷ Toscan 1978 (30-31).

¹⁶⁸ Toscan 1978 (11).

Nevertheless, it was already observed in our first chapter that the young Duke was keen to associate himself with his renowned forefathers. Bearing in mind also the lord's tolerant attitudes towards unconventional literary pursuits discussed in the previous section, we might rather safely contend that he did most likely not openly censure the *capitolo* even if he may not have cared for it much himself. To sum up, then, we may state that, during Cosimo's reign, the burlesque was at least as popular as the Petrarchan ode. What is more, thanks to its festival roots and accessibility on the one hand and its highly intellectual character on the other, it had the capacity to appeal to both uneducated classes and the cultured elite alike, thereby reaching a much larger audience than the academic sonnet ever could. Just how the *capitolo* spoke to this public will be examined next.

Fooling around in *terza rima*: a short look at burlesque semiotics

As is justly remarked by Parker, the burlesque *capitolo* is awfully hard to interpret for two important reasons: '[...] the use of a highly coded lexicon, and the tendency to allude to cultural ideas, social practices, and opinions whose significance eludes most readers today.'¹⁶⁹ As a result, the poetry was long considered too enigmatic to be worthy of academic research. Despite this notorious difficulty, a handful of scholars have dared to embark on an analysis of the genre's system of signification. The first and maybe most important of these studies was the one conducted by Jean Toscan already alluded to.¹⁷⁰ Toscan's dissertation is generally considered a canonical work on the topic of Italian burlesque; obviously, then, we cannot but start our survey of the genre's semiotics with his findings.

Le discours équivoque

Whilst an account of the genre's origins makes up the first section of his essay, by far the largest part of Toscan's research focuses on the burlesque's most conspicuous aspect: its linguistic equivocality. In opposition to the preceding scholarly tradition, the French philologist argues that the meanings and implications of Bernesque verses are not beyond our understanding. Cataloguing the various ways in which the burlesque poets toyed with semantics, Toscan manages to draw up a dictionary of the ambivalently erotic expressions utilised in the *capitoli*. With the help of such a wordlist, he argues, the exact sexual implication of any poetic term can in the end be uncovered. According to the scholar, this process of deciphering the individual words in a poem will eventually yield a clear and coherent understanding of its overall meaning. Though numerous means for linguistic travesty are at the Bernesque writer's disposal, the process of converting signification is always grounded in an

¹⁶⁹ Parker 1997 (1023); see also Longhi 1983 (2).

¹⁷⁰ Toscan 1978 (13-15): earlier studies had usually taken the content and wording of burlesque poetry at face value, while the small number of scholars that did acknowledge its polysemy had sooner or later dispensed with the genre on account of its presumed impenetrability.

already existing metaphor to guarantee its intelligibility for the public.¹⁷¹ Owing to its powerful carnival tradition, Florence's vernacular offered the burlesque poets a virtually endless supply of such euphemistic terms.¹⁷² This lexicon of double entendres extended over all kinds of realms: from abstract concepts to everyday objects and from emotions to flora and fauna – even morphological elements such as suffixes could take on an obscene connotation. Not only could Bernesque authors use these words and phrases directly; they might also draw new metaphors from them. As Toscan explains, the many ways in which the regular meaning of a term could be substituted by an erotic one can be classified in four principles. In order to assess the usefulness of his conclusions for our investigation later on, it may be helpful to briefly discuss these concepts at this point.

The first way in which a word may be eroticised is through what Toscan describes as similarity of meaning. This notion comprises the metaphor based on a formal or functional likeness between signifier and signified; so, the Italian word for *peaches* might be used to refer to the testicles simply on account of the fruit being ball-shaped.¹⁷³ The concept also includes the process by which a synonym of an already sexually charged signifier acquires an additional vulgar connotation. The second basis for semantic modification is that of contiguity of meaning or, in short, metonymy; expressions already functioning as puns may be charged with further salacious significances by way of association.¹⁷⁴ Thirdly, Toscan discerns a procedure by which words can assume a licentious quality thanks to morphological correspondences. Thus, the term *duco*, denoting the *membrum virile*, can transfer its sense to the word *duca* through the shared plural *duchi*.¹⁷⁵ The fourth and last of these principles entails the concept of contiguity of expressions; terms without erotic meaning can obtain one simply because they will often occur in conjunction with common equivocal obscenities.¹⁷⁶

It may be clear from our overview of substitution principles that the number of meanings one word can have in a burlesque poem is almost unlimited: 'Le vocabulaire des burlesques [...] se caractérise par une certaine pauvreté au niveau des signifiés et par une richesse exubérante au niveau des signifiants.'¹⁷⁷ On top of that, the subject of a *capitolo* is never clear-cut and straightforward – in an effort to equal and surpass his predecessors, the Bernesque author will always attempt to slot in all different meanings previously attributed to his topic – and the connotations of one word even tend

¹⁷¹ Toscan 1978 (143-146): *creatio ex nihilo* is not part of the burlesque poet's toolbox.

¹⁷² Toscan 1978 (106-107).

¹⁷³ Toscan 1978 (146-150).

¹⁷⁴ Toscan 1978 (151-155): so, the term *lavorio*, initially designating *coitus*, could also adopt a phallic meaning.

¹⁷⁵ Toscan 1978 (156-159): proper wordplay is also part of this method. For example, the completely innocuous word *per dono* could come to represent sodomy when read as *per dono: through the anus*.

¹⁷⁶ Toscan 1978 (160-161): this is why elliptically used demonstratives are as a rule equivocal.

¹⁷⁷ Toscan 1978 (140).

to shift throughout the same poem.¹⁷⁸ Consequently, while Toscan's work is undeniably helpful in illuminating the linguistic tricks and licentious spirit of burlesque poets, one might wonder whether his approach to their verses in the end leads to a thorough comprehension of them. To start with, his glossary of equivocal terms may well be incomplete. Secondly, given the Bernesque author's said elusiveness, it is doubtful whether Toscan's reading of their verses through an act of word-for-word decoding, with the aim of constructing a consistent interpretation, truly conforms to the way in which these poets approached their writing. On top of all this, as is rightly remarked by Parker in one of her articles, the French scholar's research only addresses burlesque poetry in general; it does not reckon with the idiosyncrasies of individual writers. Last but not least, Toscan's investigation to some extent suffers from tunnel vision, as Parker astutely points out later on: 'Toscan's tendency to focus on the erotic level of meaning causes him to overlook burlesque poets' parodies of other works and the satirical treatment of various social practices.'¹⁷⁹ All in all, it seems that, to get a proper insight in Bernesque semiotics, we need to turn our attention to something beyond its mere idiom. In the process of doing so, it may be useful to finally start focusing on Bronzino's burlesque works as well.

Bronzino's playful poetics

As was already mentioned in the preceding chapter, Bronzino composed 39 *capitoli*. Their length ranging from 120 to 500 lines, they constituted the main part of his literary oeuvre.¹⁸⁰ The artist was regarded as one of Berni's finest and most talented followers; set against other burlesque writers' crudeness and lack of imagination – the comic effect of their *capitoli* in general solely depends on blatant obscenities and grotesque phraseology – Bronzino's originality and refinement matched the intellectual subtlety of his model. His poems tend to follow Berni in his leisurely adaptation of the paradoxical encomium and contain many whimsical allegories as well as amusing parodies of both classic vernacular poetry and contemporary society.¹⁸¹ Nonetheless, Bronzino also diverged from his forebear in a number of respects – moreover, whereas the burlesque tradition was characteristically static, our artist managed to actually adapt it to his own interests. Unlike Berni, he seldom alludes to ongoing political events.¹⁸² He does, however, frequently refer to modern painters and art works.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Toscan 1978 (26).

¹⁷⁹ Parker 1997 (1023).

¹⁸⁰ Brock 2002 (9): Bronzino's *capitoli* are known from several manuscripts. The most complete one, Codice Magliabechiano VII.115, forms part of the collection in Florence's Biblioteca Nazionale. At least five of Bronzino's Bernesque poems were published during his lifetime; they were included in the second anthology of burlesque poetry issued by the Giunti press in 1555.

¹⁸¹ Parker 1997 (1019); Brock 2002 (10).

¹⁸² Parker 2000 (18): due to this lack of historical references his poems are particularly hard to date.

¹⁸³ Talvacchia 2011 (26): 'He extracts burlesque humor from a matrix of serious art.'

Contemporary theories of art are also addressed in his poems.¹⁸⁴ As far as literary parody is concerned, he may be said to surpass his model. His poetic flexibility and pliant handling of vernacular styles and traditions for satirising purposes is rather exceptional: 'Allusions to other poets' work can be explicit, approximate, or oblique. Having alluded to an established motif, Bronzino might adopt his predecessor's formulation, or he might disregard it, selecting only one aspect of a given motif. Such a range of appropriation underscores Bronzino's remarkably fluid imagination.'¹⁸⁵

The fluent character of our painter's literary artistry can also be perceived in the way in which he engenders meaning. As Parker explains, Bronzino's metaphorical idiom does not rely on clearly demarcated one-to-one correspondences. Instead, he appears to trigger allegories without allocating an exact specific connotation to them: 'He provides a mechanism in which things seem to signify, but he does not provide readers with the key to their meaning.'¹⁸⁶ Rather than piling up ribald euphemisms with a particular signification, Bronzino evokes an erotic mood by weaving together expressions creating and reinforcing each other's vulgar import. Consequently, a term's ambiguity is wholly dependent on its context. It is only through its interaction with other words that it may become an obscenity; so, sexual allegories are not consistently used in their equivocal sense in every single poem.¹⁸⁷ In such a poetic system, searching for every metaphor's exact values and presupposing a fully coherent subtext in every *capitolo* appears to be of no use at all. Perhaps, then, we should start by reading Bronzino's Bernesque verses as fluid networks, in which meaning is constantly shifting and the licentious interpretation of words and phrases is left to the reader's, or listener's, filthy imagination.¹⁸⁸ Such a conception of our artist's burlesque semiotics might certainly be helpful in attaining a better understanding of his long-winded poems, in which imagery evolves from one stanza to the next. Yet, we may ask ourselves whether the poet's free-flowing method of creating literary meaning can be applied to his static pictures as well. We will confront this and other questions as we finally return to Bronzino's portrait of Cosimo I in the conclusion of this chapter.

An equivocal eulogy: burlesque elements in Cosimo's portrait

Throughout the preceding paragraphs, we have discerned various qualities of Italian burlesque poetry. Beyond a doubt, its most conspicuous aspect proved to be its erotic polysemy. It was

¹⁸⁴ Thus, Talvacchia 2011 analyses how the artist playfully challenges some of the most important artistic doctrines of his time in a *capitolo* called *Del Pennello*.

¹⁸⁵ Parker 2000 (151); see Brock 2002 (10) and Parker 1997 (1028-1031) for Bronzino's mockery of Petrarchan vocabulary in the *capitolo* entitled *In Lode della Galea*. For an example of a parody of Dante's works in the poem *Della Cipolla* one may consult Parker 1997 (1031-1036).

¹⁸⁶ Parker 2000 (151).

¹⁸⁷ Parker 1997 (1024).

¹⁸⁸ Such a conception of Bronzino's verses in fact ties in with the Renaissance notion of *fantasia*.

furthermore established that parody comprised an important part of the genre. Especially in Bronzino's poems, the satirising of both highly respected artistic and literary paradigms appeared to form a key fundamental element. In conclusion, all this sexual ambiguity and humorous distortion of serious models was shown to be cast in a pattern inspired by the paradoxical encomium. With this characterisation of Bernesque poetics, we may at this point direct our thoughts once again to our portrait. In order to find out whether Bronzino's approach to his painting was similar to that of his poetry, we should consider whether the features and techniques detected in the artist's literary works can also be identified in this panel – in other words: could the depiction of Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus be interpreted as an ironic exaltation thick with sexual allegory and pictorial travesty?

As might be deduced from the previous section, seeking to assign a specific erotic signification to every component of our painting seems likely to be a fruitless mission. After all, as our account of Toscan's findings made plain, through the principles of substituting meaning virtually any element of a burlesque work could in itself be turned into an obscenity. We could easily embark on a quest to find vulgar connotations even in the rocks and flames seen in the picture's background.¹⁸⁹ Though this would undoubtedly be a highly entertaining task, the usefulness of such a pursuit may justifiably be questioned. Overall, it appears that Parker's analysis of Bronzino's semiotics may be a more practical starting point for our inquiry. Indeed, her description of the way in which the artist infuses his poems with a sexual atmosphere seems to get us a long way when applied to Cosimo's likeness. As was already noted in the first chapter of this essay, the portrait has an undeniably voluptuous quality; the Duke's arresting and literally highlighted nakedness and the titillating way in which he holds his bow call up a highly sensuous mood. It is important to say that this eroticism arises from the combination of these components. In agreement with Parker's understanding of Bronzino's poetics, the picture's obscenity is determined by the way in which its possibly equivocal elements work together and intensify each other's salacious import; were Cosimo properly dressed, the position of his right hand would probably not elicit any raising of the eyebrows. Conversely, as was already pointed out, by the same token the *lira's* pegbox might suddenly remind one strongly of women's genitalia.¹⁹⁰ Unfortunately, however, no matter how apt Parker's conclusions seem to be to our painting, one cannot shrug off the impression that a reading based on her characterisation of our artist's literary techniques remains rather too inconsequential; it just does not offer enough indications – and all too plain ones at that – to truly support the claim that Cosimo's portrait could be regarded as a visual Bernesque by its Cinquecento spectators. To be able to credibly posit that our

¹⁸⁹ For the equivocal meaning of rock see Toscan 1978 (586-589). Consult Toscan 1978 (609-615) for the vulgar connotations of fire.

¹⁹⁰ Note that both in this case and in that of the bow one could actually speak of substitution of meaning by means of a metaphor based on formal similarities.

work was regarded as a graphical *capitolo*, we need to find more substantiating proof. Despite its shortcomings, then, it turns out that, in the end, we must take into account Toscan's lexicon in our investigation as well. While we may not attempt to put a burlesque label on every single detail in our portrait, we can consider whether it contains elements so common to the genre that, in conjunction with the ambiguities already alluded to, they could indisputably add up to a Bernesque reading.

As it happens, the subject of Orpheus was quite a popular one among burlesque authors. Whereas the mythological bard was presented as a symbol of poetic genius in philosophic and lyrical writings, Berni and his successors regarded the disheartened lover that decided to forswear women – and along these lines all poets – as the inventor of sodomy.¹⁹¹ On top of that, the already tantalising placement of the figure's right hand might have a more specific connotation embedded in Bernesque tradition. According to Toscan, the descriptions of anal fornication usually fall apart in three stages. The first one involves the proper positioning of the sodomised object, after which lubrication is applied during the second phase. The final step consists of the channelling of the protagonist's member. As a rule, it is indicated by mention of the hand: 'Il [l'agent] apprend son sexe "en main" afin de le "conduire" au contact de l'anus.'¹⁹² Although we might be making too much of a burlesque reading of our portrait by taking Cerberus into account too – he may, after all, be no more than an obligatory component of a painting set in Hades – it is interesting to note as a final point that the dog was a familiar Bernesque symbol for the recipient of buggery.¹⁹³ In this light, the reason for Pluto's pet being depicted as calm and subjugated, already noted as a curious revision of its initial design in our first chapter, may suddenly become clear. On the whole, I think that, at least as far as its equivocal imagery goes, we may say that our portrait meets the requirements of a burlesque poem.

With regard to the spoofing of other works of art, it was already pointed out that Bronzino's painting of Cosimo refers to two sculptures most likely well-known amongst his fellow citizens. The first was Bandinelli's statue of Orpheus with Cerberus. In view of the picture's by now patent metaphorical licentiousness, it may in my opinion rightly be argued that the Duke's portrayal in fact constitutes a cheeky and irreverent reinterpretation of the work commissioned by Leo X. This parodying spirit

¹⁹¹ Toscan 1978 (472): 'Le personnage du poète-sodomite est [...] motivé par la tradition qui, depuis Ovide, faisait d'Orphée, le premier des poètes, l'inventeur des amours aberrantes. [...] La seule mention du nom de poète a peut suffire à appeler l'idée de "sodomie".'

¹⁹² Toscan 1978 (270).

¹⁹³ Toscan 1978 (1591-1593); one may wonder whether the fact that the guardian of the Underworld is depicted with only two heads could be explained in this context. With the help of Toscan's dictionary and a pinch of imagination, we would undoubtedly be able to think up all kinds of spicy interpretations – though none of them would probably live up to the standards of academic research. For this reason, we will leave the question unanswered for now.

appears to be further enhanced by the incorporation of the *Torso Belvedere* as a model; the seemingly odd conflation of the boldly muscular upper body and Cosimo's boyish and rosy-cheeked face may well be compared to the comical juxtaposing of literary traditions in Bronzino's *capitoli*. One might herein even discern a mocking allusion to the ancient Roman habit of attaching aged portrait heads to broad-shouldered youthful bodies; whereas the classical custom was aimed at representing a combination of *gravitas* and *virilitas*, Bronzino's contrasting manner of painting seems to actually undermine the latter through the absence of the former. Apart from all this, the fact that the *Torso Belvedere* was thought to be a representation of Hercules may have some significance too. Though normally considered one of the champions of classical mythology, the hero also functioned as a model for sodomites on account of his affection for his servant and boy lover Hylas.¹⁹⁴

Having established that Bronzino's painting of Cosimo exhibits both the erotic polysemy and the witty mocking of revered models characteristic of his poetry, it now remains to be seen whether his portrait could indeed be regarded as a pictorial paradoxical encomium. As was explicated in this chapter's first section, Berni had appropriated the genre's structure with the exclusion of its typical didactic intent. What resulted was a type of poetry effecting humour through a clash of high and low styles and subjects. As we have seen, such incongruity is present in our picture as well. Just like Bronzino's verses, the work may be said to operate simultaneously on two levels of meaning: at first sight, the references to celebrated sculptures and illustrious mythological figures seem to afford the portrait a dignified grandeur. Moreover, as is typical of paradoxical encomia, the spectator is drawn into the painting by its life-sized format and Cosimo's enticing gaze.¹⁹⁵ At a closer look, however, the work appears to display the same sexual ambiguity and conspicuously burlesque imagery salient in our artist's *capitoli*. Due to this intermingling of the heroic and the erotic, I believe our portrait can indeed be interpreted as a visual burlesque. The question whether this would also have held true for its Cinquecento viewers will be answered as we proceed to the final conclusion of this thesis.

¹⁹⁴ Toscan 1978 (194): already in ancient times, Martial had justified his predilection for young boys by alluding to the examples of several Olympian gods, amongst whom was Hercules. We find a similar justification for Orpheus' aversion of women in Poliziano's abovementioned *Favola di Orfeo*.

¹⁹⁵ Note that Falkenburg 1989 also draws attention to the fact that the captivating quality of Pieter Aertsen's paintings is amongst other things established by their full-blown size.

Conclusion

The main goal of this thesis has been to find out in what way an awareness of Bronzino's poetry and literary activities, specifically his writing of burlesques, can lead to an improved understanding of his portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus. The issue was brought up against the background of the concept of *ut pictura poesis*, the broader question being to what extent a study of the literary context of art works can better our comprehension of them. To deal with the first matter, an approach based on a combination of reception theory and semiotics was put forward. By charting the cultural environment in which our portrait was created, we attempted to establish the social framework of the public to which our painting may have addressed itself. Through a brief analysis of the burlesque genre, as well as the ways in which Bronzino generated meaning in his poetry, we tried to establish part of the literary *Erwartungshorizont* of these potential viewers. With the information gathered from these explorations we can now endeavour to identify the community of beholders implied by our portrait. Simultaneously, we may attempt to answer the question as to how they might have interacted with the painting. To begin with, it was shown in our third chapter that Bronzino seems to apply a very similar approach to his portrait of Cosimo and his Bernesque poetry; this could imply that the addressees of the painting are also identical to those at whom his verses were generally directed. To be sure, the picture's overtly obvious burlesque elements do suggest that the viewers our artist had in mind when creating it would have been familiar with the topics and metaphorical idiom of the *capitolo* and able to play the intellectual game represented by it. As we have seen in our second section, such an audience can indeed be found in the intellectual circles in which Bronzino moved. What is more, because of the artist's involvement in the theoretical discussions of the Umidi and later Accademia Fiorentina, as well as his representation of these debates – in particular that concerning the *paragone* – in his visual works, the blending of disciplines exemplified in our portrait may well have been part of the *Erwartungshorizont* of these viewers too.

As was stated in the setup of this essay, its goal was not to find out why and by whom the portrait of Cosimo I as Orpheus was commissioned. On account of our conclusions, one might say that, of the scholarly interpretations offered thus far, the one that associates the painting with the newly patronised Accademia Fiorentina appears to be most convincing. However, to truly answer the question regarding our picture's origin, our findings can only serve as a starting point. New research could focus on the role burlesque poetry might have played in the occasions and contexts that have been connected with the painting's production – one may perhaps think of wedding ceremonies or political events. Cosimo's part would also have to be studied more closely; despite his tolerant attitude towards ribald artists both during his early and later rule, it remains hard to believe that the

new lord would have cast himself in the role of a sodomising poet. To further our understanding of the portrait and back up our findings, moreover, scholars could broaden the social and cultural scope of their studies. The notion of *fantasia* and Cinquecento views on audience participation, for example, seem to constitute an important context for our painting as well. The literary background might be expanded too; an inquiry into the general poetic handling of Orpheus, starting with Poliziano's *Favola*, or a study of the connection between the burlesque and older genres, such as the seemingly related Menippean satire, might well yield interesting results. In addition, European literary and artistic developments similar to those in Italy, only slightly touched upon throughout our treatise, could be taken into consideration. Finally, as far as the social context is concerned, one might look further into the burlesque's link with the Carnival festival and its celebrations.

It may be clear from our conclusions that a broad consideration of the literary contexts of an art work by a combined approach of reception theory and semiotics can indeed be very helpful in its interpretation. As was said in the introduction to this thesis, interdisciplinary research conjoining painting and poetry is still in its infancy: in my opinion, we have a new and exciting world to gain.

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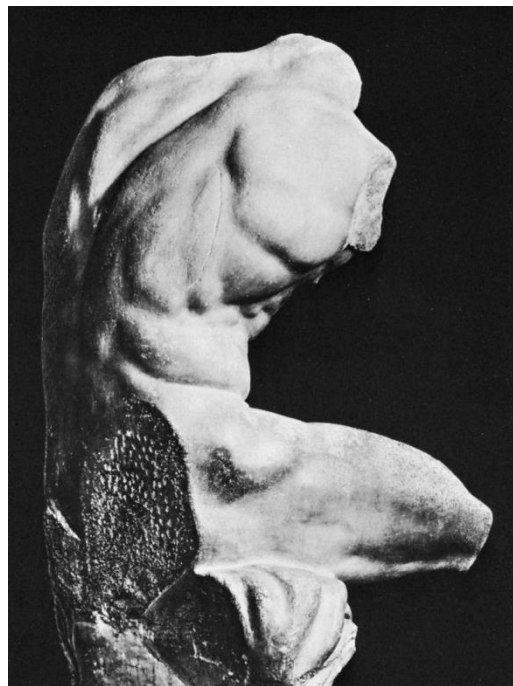
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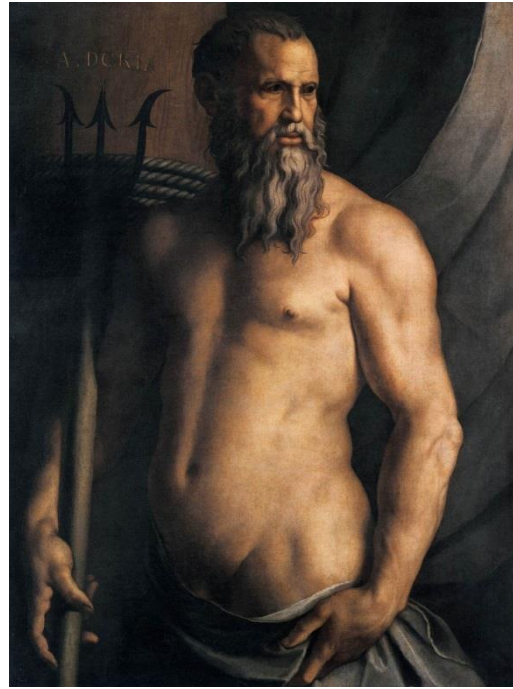
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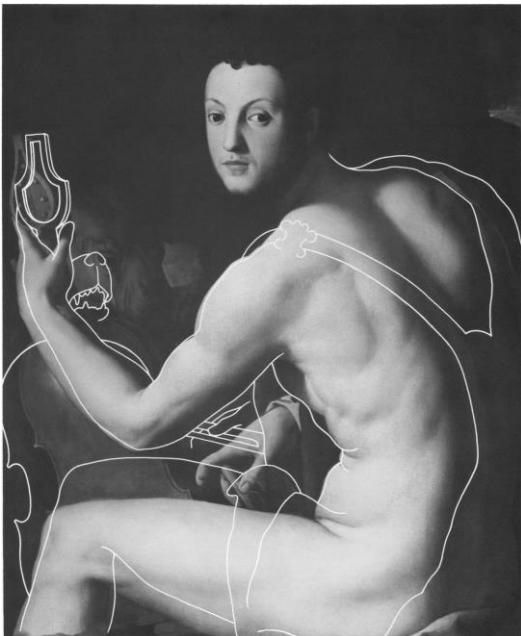
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