

**EROTICISM IN THE ART OF PARMIGIANINO AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE MANNERIST STYLE**

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Eroticism in the Art of Parmigianino and Its Implications for the Mannerist Style

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In the paintings, drawings, and prints of the sixteenth-century Parmesan painter Francesco Mazzola, known as Parmigianino (1503-40), we see a profusion of erotic images that has been carefully avoided by most writers on the artist. Nevertheless, Parmigianino's eroticism is an integral part of his style and can lead to a clearer understanding of the role of eroticism in sixteenth-century Italian art.

In Parmigianino's work eroticism arises in explicit imagery of sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual, in depictions of androgynes and sexually ambiguous figures (although the artist was capable of rendering the sexes as distinctly different), and in a general sensuality deriving partly from the conventions of Parmigianino's style. This imagery occurs in all the media used by the artist, but is especially evident in his drawings.

Parmigianino's erotic interests have several sources. First, his androgynes may be traced to his documented interest in alchemy; androgynes are an alchemical symbol of the transmutation of matter. They also symbolize—in Neo-platonic philosophy—man's original state before the Fall. Second, the courts of sixteenth-century Italy were composed of sophisticated aristocrats, writers, courtesans, and artists, to whom such eroticism would be both amusing and pleasantly arousing. Third, eroticism constitutes one more device by which a Mannerist artist might complicate his work.

After a brief historiographic survey of Mannerism, this paper examines and classifies specific instances of eroticism in the work of Parmigianino. It then places them in context by describing related aspects of contemporaneous culture. It concludes by explaining the importance of eroticism as a stylistic convention both for Parmigianino and for Mannerism in general.

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INTRODUCTION

Art-historical studies of eroticism have generally lagged behind those of other aspects of the discipline—quite naturally so, since until relatively recently human sexuality was not considered a suitable subject for open discussion. Nevertheless, sexuality is one of those rare parts of human nature which are trans-cultural. It can provide a connecting link between people of different places and times. As a product of the human mind, art can as easily reflect the sexual nature of existence as it can the theoretical and esthetic interests of the artist.

Erotic art, then, is the result of the conjunction of sexual and artistic interests. The specific form that an erotic piece of art may take in a given time or place, however, is determined by a variety of other factors: environmental influences, esthetic aims, the artist's personal interests, the tastes of patrons, and the art's function, to name only a few. To ignore the erotic side of an artist's oeuvre is tantamount to a willful rejection of a powerful force in the psychological and emotional make-up of the art's creator. Likewise, the recognition of erotic elements in art can be an equally powerful tool to understanding the art, its maker, and the culture that surrounded its creation.

This is exactly the case with the work of the Parmesan painter Francesco Mazzola, known as Parmigianino (1503-40). Throughout his oeuvre—paintings, drawings and prints—runs a thread of unmistakable eroticism. Yet this eroticism is usually ignored by critics and writers who either refuse or are unable to recognize it. Eroticism, however, constitutes an integral part of Parmigianino's distinctive style, and the study of it brings about not only an increased understanding of Parmigianino, but also revealing insights into sixteenth-century culture and into the nature of Mannerism.

CHAPTER I

THE MANNERIST STYLE AND PARMIGIANINO

In order to understand properly Parmigianino's eroticism and its role in Mannerism, we must first understand Mannerism itself. The meaning—and even the very existence—of Mannerism have been a matter of debate. Sixteenth-century theorists were quite concerned with the quality of contemporary art and with the factors that might contribute to its greatness. Even though the period had its critics who bemoaned the sorry state of art, most artists felt that they had achieved a period of immense artistic achievement that began with Leonardo and Raphael and was continuing in their day. Although their ideas and terminology seem to us to be eminently applicable to Mannerism as we now understand it (as different from the art of High Renaissance masters such as Raphael), the critics themselves saw no such division.

Only in the seventeenth century did this distinction begin to appear, accompanied by the historiographic denigration of Mannerism. This negative attitude continued (for the most part) into the twentieth century. The re-evaluation of Mannerism that then began has given rise to numerous theories, many of which seem to make little sense relative to the actual works of art. Nevertheless, all of these approaches contribute to our understanding of the style. To help in grasping the intricacies of Mannerism, a brief historiographic summary of its major historical and critical interpretations makes a useful beginning.

Some consideration must be given to the word Mannerism itself. Modern writers on the subject have thoroughly explored the meaning of the words Mannerism and *maniera*. Etymological discussions of the differences between the meanings of *maniera* now and in the sixteenth century are interesting, but to refine further the connotations of the terms would not be especially helpful in this present discussion of Parmigianino's eroticism. The term Mannerism is largely an art-historical convenience. It refers to the prevailing artistic style in central and northern Italy (excluding, for the most part, Venice) between about 1520 and 1590, which was distinguished by certain formal and iconographic characteristics that I will discuss shortly. I use Mannerism in this general sense.¹

We may look to Vasari for some of the earliest writings on Mannerism. Vasari saw the art of his time as the rebirth of the "perfection" of classical art. In his preface to the third part of the *Lives of the Artists* he described how the art of his time has achieved such perfection.² He began with the work of Leonardo da Vinci and continued by presenting High Renaissance masters and Mannerists together in the same section, judging them by the same standards. He saw no division between the

¹ Riccardo Scrivano, *Cultura e letteratura nel cinquecento* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1966), p. 232, agrees with this interpretation of the term as a convention to make sense of the period's culture.

² Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, 10 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd. and the Medici Society, 1912-14; reprint ed. New York: AMS Press, 1976), 1: lviii.

High Renaissance and Mannerism. “Rule, order, proportion, draughtsmanship and manner”³ were the achievements that set apart the artists of this period. Vasari described a method of creating the best figures:

Manner then attained to the greatest beauty from the practice which arose of constantly copying the most beautiful objects, and joining together these most beautiful things . . . so as to make a figure of the greatest possible beauty.⁴

He named also “beautiful costumes,” “bizarre fancies,” and loveliness of coloring”⁵ as elements distinguishing the art of his time. “Divine grace” was important (especially for Parmigianino). All of this was “accomplished with a manner so facile in the overcoming of difficulties.”⁶ Thus, some of Mannerism’s most salient qualities as praised by Vasari (i.e., eclecticism and facility) are those which are most highly criticized by later writers.

In 1586 Giovanni Battista Armenini wrote a long treatise titled *De’ veri precetti della pittura*. He intended the work as a guidebook for artists. It contained carefully and specifically delineated rules for artists, covering both technique and theory. Armenini bemoaned the fate of the art of his time. According to him, the truly great artists had come and gone, and, without drastic changes, art would again decay to the level of centuries before.⁷ However, despite his gloomy warnings, his handbook on the rules of painting revealed numerous Mannerist principles. For instance, the painting must appeal not just to the eye (for the eye is “easily dazzled”), but to the intellect.⁸ Invention and imagination were emphasized.⁹ Significantly, he proclaimed that the most important quality to art is “a good style.”¹⁰ Paradoxically, he simultaneously criticized other Mannerist principles such as over-attentiveness to anatomical and trivial details and the fault of deriving too much of one’s style from previous masters.¹¹ Armenini wrote late in the century, as the Mannerist style was losing ground, soon to be replaced by the naturalism of Caravaggio and the baroque drama of the Carracci. On balance, however, Armenini placed himself solidly within the Mannerist camp, despite his lamentations over the decline of art.

Lodovico Dolce’s earlier *Dialogo della pittura*, published in 1557, took the form of an invented dialogue between the writer Pietro Aretino and his contemporary, the grammarian Giovan Francesco Fabrini. In the course of their discussion, they shed light on contemporary thought concerning the arts, especially in Venice, where Dolce wrote. Invention, design, and coloring made up painting.¹² In modern terms this would be subject matter, formal elements, and color. Dolce explained that a painter must “surpass” nature by “displaying within a single human body, by dint of

³ Ibid., 4: 79.

⁴ Ibid., 4: 80.

⁵ Ibid., 4: 81.

⁶ Ibid., 4: 82-85.

⁷ Giovanni Battista Armenini, *On the True Precepts of the Art of Painting*, ed., trans. and introduction by Edward J. Olszewski (New York: Burt Franklin and Co., Inc., 1977), p. 71.

⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 141-50.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 129.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 134, 136.

¹² Mark W. Roskill, *Dolce’s “Aretino” and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento* (New York: New York University Press for the College Art Association of America, 1968), p. 117.

art, that entire perfection of beauty which nature barely exhibits in a thousand bodies.¹³ The artist's goal, then, was the achievement of a perfect ideal through the eclectic melding of the best of nature's imperfect examples. Dolce's description of proper proportion was a canon of Parmigianinesque elongation and stylization.¹⁴ Although he required that the sexes be clearly and properly defined, the "delicate body ought to take precedence over a muscular one."¹⁵ This was a principle clearly observed by Parmigianino.

Despite some criticism of Parmigianino by Dolce, the *Dialogo* inevitably reflects some of the painter's concepts and attitudes. Aretino and Dolce corresponded at great length, discussing literary, artistic, and critical matters.¹⁶ Since Aretino was also a great admirer of Parmigianino, and in fact commissioned the painting *Madonna della Rosa*,¹⁷ many of Parmigianino's esthetic ideals may have filtered through to Dolce by way of their mutual friend, Aretino.

With the rise of the Baroque style and the success of the Counter-Reformation, Mannerism's fortunes went the way of the culture that had produced it. *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni* of Giovan Pietro Bellori, published in 1672, gives an idea of the disrepute into which Late Renaissance art had fallen by the Seicento. Bellori believed that with Raphael painting reattained the pinnacle it had achieved with the Greeks and Romans. Then art fell into a decline, becoming lowly and vulgar. According to Bellori, this came about because artists envisioned art with "*la maniera*" and preferred fantastic schemes which relied on "*pratica*" (technical ability) rather than "*imitazione*" (imitation of nature).¹⁸ By Bellori's time a complete reversal in artistic thought brought Mannerist artists into disrepute.

Bellori's negative and reproachful attitude toward Mannerist artists continued through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians (such as Alois Riegl and Max Dvorak) hinted at a revised approach to Mannerism, its real reappraisal began with Walter Friedländer. The two essays in his *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting* were first published in German in 1925. Friedländer's work, the first thorough, revisionist view of Mannerism, became a landmark in our understanding of the style.

Friedländer's carefully formed study is not without its weaknesses, however. First among these is his persistence in referring to Mannerism as the "anticlassical style." He portrayed Mannerism as an artistic crisis and as a revolt against the High Renaissance.¹⁹ He equated classic art with the High Renaissance of Raphael and Leonardo rather than with the antique. Friedländer also divided Mannerism into the specifically anticlassical period of the early "revolt" (that is, of Pontormo, Rosso, and Parmigianino) and the "*maniera*" (the period after 1550 with its "repetition,

¹³ Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁴ For an example, see *ibid.*, pp. 137-39.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 141-43.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 32-35.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

¹⁸ Giovan Pietro Bellori, *Le Vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni* (1672; reprint ed. Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1976), p. 31.

¹⁹ This depiction drew from the ideas of Dvořák and others who saw Mannerism as a "crisis." Such an insistence upon a revolution against the status-quo ultimately found its source in Hegelian philosophy

cleverness and playful exaggeration”).²⁰ He exhibited some of the negative attitudes of his predecessors regarding this later period: for instance, in his claim that “Alessandro Allori . . . flooded all Tuscany with his insipid pictures”²¹ From these passages we can see that Friedländer persisted in judging Mannerist art by using the standards of the art of the High Renaissance as the paradigm by which art should be judged.

Friedländer’s greatest contribution to Mannerist historiography—besides the very fact of his serious re-evaluation of it—was his thorough explanation of Mannerist formal principles. “Anticlassic” art involved itself with a “subjective reconstruction.”²² By using the examples of Pontormo, Rosso, and Parmigianino, Friedländer showed how this reconstruction was achieved through “a subjective rhythmic figuration and an unreal space formation.”²³ His observations on the salient qualities of Mannerist painting were accurate and valuable. He gave a clear conception of what Mannerism looks like—at least, in its “anticlassic,” or early, phase. However, he revealed no underlying concepts or intentions wherein these formal elements might have found their roots.

A contemporary of Friedländer and the author of a monograph on Parmigianino, Lili Fröhlich-Bum accurately (and precociously, placing herself in opposition to Friedländer and those who saw Mannerism as a revolt against the High Renaissance) described Mannerism in terms of stylized grace and beauty. Uninterested in truth to nature, the Mannerists created a new synthesis of the achievements of the High Renaissance, especially those of Raphael, and a new exploration of the antique. However, she also believed they were little concerned with issues of content.²⁴

The 1950s and ‘60s saw a series of reappraisals of Mannerism. A major show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1955 sought to present Mannerism as a pan-European phenomenon, crossing the borders of both nations and artistic media. Scholars looked at the art of the sixteenth century with renewed vigor and depth. The result was an outpouring of speculation and writing on Mannerism in the 1960s.

Among the first studies to appear was that of Craig Hugh Smyth. However, Smyth’s specific concept of Mannerism is not easy to determine. In *Mannerism and Maniera* he presented an exhaustively researched treatise that somehow managed to ignore larger questions.²⁵ He described, as did Friedländer before him, the formal conventions of Mannerism. Smyth listed forced flatness in figures, flat lighting, angular elements, interest in finish and details, a tilted-upward ground, divided and incoherent space, and exaggerated postures.²⁶ He emphasized sources for such conventions in antique reliefs.²⁷ Although Mannerist conventions had begun to appear in the 1520s, Smyth saw them as coalescing and increasing around 1530.²⁸ Michelangelo’s influence was

²⁰ Walter Friedländer, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting*, with an introduction by Donald Posner (New York: Schocken Books, 1965; reprint ed., 1976), p. 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁴ Lili Fröhlich-Bum, *Parmigianino und der Manierismus* (Vienna: Kunstverlag Anton Schroll & Co., 1921), p. 119.

²⁵ Craig Hugh Smyth, *Mannerism and Maniera* (Locust Valley, New York: J. J. Augustin Publishers, 1962).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

recognized,²⁹ and Smyth noted the modern schools of thought regarding Mannerism and reticently suggested that perhaps a more general term—such as Late Renaissance—should be used for the period from the end of the High Renaissance to the time of the Carracci.³⁰ The copious footnotes included an interesting discussion of the use of the word “style” as perhaps a better translation of “*maniera*” and gave interesting asides on the thoughts of Cinquecento and Seicento theorists.³¹

Smyth, however, never stated what he thought Mannerism really was. Like others, he described its outward appearance and delineated it in art-historical terms, but he never told us why or what it *is*. Perhaps Smyth’s most interesting and valuable observation was his discussion of a quote from Vasari. Vasari saw *licenzia* as a factor contributing to the superiority of sixteenth-century painting: “*nella regola una licenzia*,” within the rule, license³² Smyth suggested that “*regola*” was “antique derived rules” and “*licenzia*” resulted in “license, variation, surprise, within the *maniera* rule.”³³ This description echoed in words what one actually sees in Mannerist painting: artists striving to excel in imaginative invention within the stylizing conventions of the Mannerist rule.

The mid-1960s saw several writers continue with the old idea of Mannerism as a crisis. Giuliano Briganti, while giving a concise history of the style’s development, persisted in seeing Mannerism as the result of cultural upheaval. He characterized it as a “decadence” that was “subtle and intellectual.”³⁴ He overemphasized Michelangelo’s role and, astoundingly, saw no relationship between Mannerism and the Baroque.³⁵ He mentioned eroticism in passing,³⁶ but did not expound upon it.

Arnold Hauser wrote from a viewpoint that was quintessentially Hegelian/Marxist.³⁷ Although parts of his argument were intriguing, his insistence on Hegelian theories of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis were really inapplicable in discussing Mannerism. His continual use of negatives such as “anti-classic” and “anti-humanist” furthered the tendentious view of Mannerism as a revolution. His attempt to propose “alienation” as the key to Mannerism was so vague that it strained credulity. It related little to the visual information given by the works themselves.

Franzsepp Würtenberger’s book³⁸ described Mannerists and their work and included much information on architecture, gardens, and other subjects not often touched upon. Yet he still did not explain what Mannerism is. Nevertheless, he made several important points. First, he

²⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 27-30.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

³² Ibid., pp. 7, 23, 28.

³³ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁴ Giuliano Briganti, *Italian Mannerism*, trans. Dr. Margaret Kunzle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), p. 26.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁷ Arnold Hauser, *Mannerism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art*, trans. the author and Erich Mosbacher, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1965).

³⁸ Franzsepp Würtenberger, *Mannerism: The European Style of the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Michael Heron (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963).

recognized an element of eroticism in Mannerism (however limited, as he saw it).³⁹ Second, his remark that “the Mannerist artist had no need of the real world around him”⁴⁰ was a penetrating observation on the utterly detached sophistication of Mannerism.

A less labored and more accurate interpretation of Mannerism was beginning to emerge. Sydney J. Freedberg’s sensible ideas about Mannerism were published in 1965.⁴¹ Among the qualities he saw as typifying Mannerism were artifice, sculpturality, stylization, and an intellectual estheticism.⁴² The use of quotations was noted, as was the use of indirect allusions that worked on a variety of levels, thus causing intentional difficulty in interpretation.⁴³ By proposing that “*maniera* forms are a commentary on appearance more than a description of it”⁴⁴ Freedberg accurately showed that while Mannerism may be divided into an early period (about 1520-40) and a late period (about 1540-85), Mannerism was still a perfectly good term for the entire epoch. He also showed the illogic of the term anticlassical because of the rarity of truly anticlassical art in the period.⁴⁵

John Shearman presented the most comprehensive and historically logical interpretation of Mannerism. In essence, his views were similar to Freedberg’s, although he stated them somewhat differently. Shearman began by asking that Mannerism be examined on its own terms.⁴⁶ This entailed our understanding that for the Mannerist artist, effortless virtuosity was a quality much sought-after. The conquest of *difficultà* resulted in *virtù* in the artwork. Artifice and caprice were equally important.⁴⁷ The stylized, beautiful artificiality of Mannerist painting was found also in literature and other arts. In fact, Shearman saw literary Mannerism as one of the primary stimuli towards Mannerism in the visual arts.⁴⁸ He explained definitively that Mannerism was a natural extension of the ideals of the high Renaissance, not a revolution against it. Unlike some authors, Shearman believed that Raphael was equally as important as Michelangelo as a progenitor of Mannerism. After Raphael’s death (with Michelangelo away in Florence) a group of artists in Rome developed and elaborated on the new “visual language” of Mannerism. These included Polidoro da Caravaggio, Perino del Vaga, Rosso Fiorentino, and Parmigianino.⁴⁹

Citing examples in sculpture, literature, music, theater, and architecture, Shearman showed that Mannerism’s sophisticated artifice was a pan-cultural phenomenon.⁵⁰ He clearly demonstrated that Mannerism was not the result of some vague crisis or tension and that such notions have their roots in a distorted, twentieth-century perspective. Rather, Mannerism was the expression of “a more cultured age” (as its practitioners saw their time). This was an age that measured culture in the

³⁹ Ibid., p. 221.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 175.

⁴¹ Sydney J. Freedberg, “Observations on the Painting of the *Maniera*,” *Art Bulletin* 47 (June 1965):187-97.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 187, 190, 192.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 191-92.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 189.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 195-97.

⁴⁶ John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967; reprint ed., 1973), p. 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 49-70.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 81-133.

arts by variety in composition and by the use of obscurity and of the fantastic in content.⁵¹ Mannerism was an art of connoisseurs rather than of courts.⁵²

Shearman's account of Mannerism is by far the most historically grounded and the best supported by the visual evidence. The writings of sixteenth-century artistic theorists such as Vasari as well as the art itself supported this view of Mannerism as the expression of a sophisticated, refined, intellectual esthetic.

Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, author of a monograph on Parmigianino, agreed that Shearman best understood and explained the style. Fagiolo dell'Arco saw the term itself as worn out. He wrote that our views of Mannerism have been seen through a "deforming filter" of twentieth-century artistic movements that have projected modern ideas of "crisis" and "irrational will" onto the sixteenth century. He pictured Mannerism as the "outcome (cultured, difficult, intellectual) and not the negation of the High Renaissance."⁵³

The visual appearance and formal qualities of Mannerism were well described in the writings of Smyth, Friedlander, and Shearman. They outlined many of the primary characteristics that distinguish Mannerism from other artistic styles. Vasari and his contemporaries provided us with contemporaneous esthetic attitudes, while Freedberg and Shearman (able to see Mannerism in historical perspective) described what Mannerism really *was*.

All of these theories may be synthesized into a view of Mannerism as the artistic expression of a civilization enthralled with itself. Proud of their time's intellectual achievements, the sixteenth-century artists wanted to show their sophistication and learning. They did so by creating art that echoed this sophistication. They wanted everyone to know how clever they were, and expressed this desire by emphasizing their style.

Style itself represented the cumulative artistic knowledge of the artist. The more refined and "stylish" the artist's individual style was, the more knowledgeable and respected he was by his peers. Virtuosity, facility, grace, charm, and beauty were all woven into an esthetic fabric of complexity and elegance. The *difficoltà* in execution, which the Mannerist artist was expected to overcome with *facilità*, paralleled a similar struggle in the viewer. The difficulty in interpreting the works' intellectualized layers of meaning was intended to be overcome with facility because of the viewer's sophistication. The contrived nature of Mannerism naturally led to artificiality, but artifice, too, was an expression of style. Characterized by these formal, iconographic, and esthetic goals, my own definition of Mannerism would, like Shearman's, exclude most Venetian art, but would include the art of the followers of Michelangelo and Raphael and other northern and central Italian artists during the middle to late sixteenth century that had a desire to refine and elaborate some of the principles of High Renaissance art. With these ideas in mind, we are prepared to understand the role of eroticism in Mannerism and in the work of Parmigianino.

Writers and historians have been reluctant to discuss eroticism's role in Mannerism if, indeed, they even recognized its existence. Naturally, this reaction is to some extent due to the discomfort

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 135-62.

⁵² Ibid., p. 175.

⁵³ "... conclusione (colta, difficile, intellettuale) e non la negazione dell'High Renaissance." Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Parmigianino: Un saggio sull'ermetismo nel Cinquecento* (Rome: Mario Bulzoni Editore, 1970), p. 89. Translation the author.

of earlier generations in dealing with human sexuality. Nevertheless, a stream of eroticism, both subtle and blatant, wound its way through much Mannerist art, especially that of Parmigianino.

To begin a study of eroticism, the usage of the term should be defined. In this study eroticism describes images and concepts that are sexually referential. However, they are generally psychologically or emotionally “loaded” to some degree; that is, they are presented in such a way as to reach that part of the mind concerned with the sexual drives rather than appealing only intellectually.⁵⁴ This does not mean that eroticism cannot be intellectualized, for as we shall see, the Mannerist artist did just that. It does mean that for a work to be erotic, no matter how intellectually refined, it must connect with the seat of sexual pleasure in the mind. Similarly, the erotic aspect need not be explicit, so long as it in some way crosses into the arena of sexual desire. In the case of Parmigianino the sensuality of his figures and of his style often is one of the subtly suggestive qualities which make the work erotic.

Eroticism was not omnipresent in Mannerist painting. To picture it as an all-pervasive phenomenon would be a mistake. However, it unquestionably exists. These erotic tendencies may be traced, to some degree, to the sixteenth-century art world’s unbounded admiration for Michelangelo. From the startlingly masculine representation of the *Risen Christ* (Fig. 1) in Santa Maria Sopra Minerva to the unabashedly frank and erotic sensuality of the *Dying Slave* (Fig. 2), eroticism recurred repeatedly in his work. Michelangelo was hailed in writings of the time as a paragon of artistic virtue;⁵⁵ inevitably his style and its eroticism were imitated and influenced later artists.

The lessons of Michelangelo were not lost on Mannerist artists such as Rosso Fiorentino. The violent sensuality of *Moses Defending the Daughters of Jethro* (Fig. 3) was due in part to the Michelangelesque contortions of the muscular figures. In a work such as the *Dead Christ Supported by Angels* (Fig. 4) in Boston, Christ’s body showed a supple, muscular, sexual energy that is far from corpse-like. Michelangelo’s pupil Giulio Romano was more explicitly erotic in his illustrations of sexual positions for which Aretino wrote his infamous *Sonnetti lussuriosi* (Fig. 38). The icy, incestuous sexuality of Bronzino’s *Allegory* (Fig. 5) was another obvious example of Mannerist eroticism.

Mannerist eroticism also included the use of asexual, androgynous, and hermaphroditic figures. Asexual describes the quality of being without sexually distinguishing features. Androgynous and hermaphroditic refer to the presence of characteristics of both sexes in one being (hermaphroditic referring more specifically to the genitalia). For instance, Michelangelo’s portrayals of women are basically male figures with unrealistic additions of breasts. In his *Pietà* (Fig. 6) Michelangelo’s pupil Sebastiano del Piombo gives us one of the more mannish Madonnas of art history. Artists who were perfectly capable of depicting sexual differences often chose to ignore or confuse these differences, or to smooth over them to produce sexually neutral or ambivalent figures. As we shall see, Parmigianino was no exception in this use of androgynes. He was capable of

⁵⁴ This is why such things as medical diagrams of the sexual organs are not erotic. They are aimed at the intellect rather than tapping into natural sex drives. A scientifically-presented anatomical study is not erotic for this same reason.

⁵⁵ See for instance Vasari’s section on Michelangelo and Dolce’s dialogues on painting.

rendering highly masculine or feminine figures, yet he often chose to depict asexual or androgynous ones instead.

Occasionally, some writers have admitted to an erotic element in Mannerism. For instance, Franzsepp Würtenberger described Mannerism as expressing a highly developed sensuality.⁵⁶ But only Gustav René Hocke dealt at any length with eroticism. Hocke's theory of Mannerism⁵⁷ sought to draw parallels between the sixteenth-century Mannerists and early twentieth-century artists such as the Surrealists by depicting both periods as times of crisis. As we have seen, this is not the case. However, among the many interesting observations Hocke made were several dealing with the roles of eroticism, androgyny, and mysticism in Mannerism. He saw in Mannerism an element of pan-sexualism, pointing out that in portraying Nature (albeit a refined Nature), the Mannerist artist could hardly ignore the force of sexuality.⁵⁸ The role of eroticism in Christian mysticism was examined.⁵⁹ Motives of "inversion" were described as characteristic of all mannerist epochs and as including homosexuality and androgyny.⁶⁰ Hocke saw androgynous figures in the work of Leonardo and admitted to an element of eroticism in the work of Rosso.⁶¹ In fact, according to Hocke, the role of eroticism is so important that "the Mannerists between 1520 and 1660 were obsessed with sexual problems"⁶²

Although Hocke was mostly correct in his observations, Mannerists were hardly "obsessed with sexual problems." Obsession was far too raw and unrefined to interest the Mannerist artist. However, the Mannerist would not overlook an opportunity to further complicate his work by additions of eroticism. Works such as Bronzino's *Allegory* (Fig. 5) and the works of Parmigianino that will be examined illustrate the Mannerist's penchant for infusing works with an eroticism that he has refined (by means of a coolly intellectual esthetic) into another sign of the sophistication of his art.

Parmigianino's style was particularly suited to this process because of its characteristic stylization and subordination of appearances to an esthetic program. Sydney Freedberg has thoroughly explained Parmigianino's style. He described how Parmigianino sought the artistic realization of the *disegno interno*: an "inner design" that originated in reality but was an archetype, more perfect than the natural world. He achieved this through elongation and stylization. His compositions were characterized by harmonious, rhythmic energy and a relief-like spatial construction dependent upon the figures that occupy the space. Lighting was consistent, but highly artificial. Colors were generally cool and rarely intense. Modeling was generalized and revealed no internal structure within the figures.⁶³

⁵⁶ Würtenberger, p. 221.

⁵⁷ Gustav René Hocke, *Die Welt als Labyrinth: Manier und Manie in der europäischen Kunst* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1957).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 181, 184-86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-89.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 190, 34.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁶³ Sydney J. Freedberg, *Parmigianino: His Works in Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950; reprint ed. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), pp. 3-27. The following stylistic description is taken from this source.

Parmigianino's typical elongation was naturally suited to female figures, and the depiction of females preoccupied him. According to Freedberg, the artist transformed male figures similarly, but because the male figure was less tractable to Parmigianino's stylizations, he retained more of his natural form. Parmigianino depicted male musculature with "rhythmic linear conventions."⁶⁴ His style was dictated by a Mannerist canon of design which:

. . . was formulated in the Mannerist's mind in accordance with the aesthetic and expressive preferences which existed in his personality, which was formed in turn from the interaction of the man with the personality of his time⁶⁵

Freedberg believed that Parmigianino's esthetic ideals precluded many other qualities of content; his figures were a direct projection of an esthetic program. Two essential qualities of Mannerism were to be found in Parmigianino's work: *venustà*, defined by Dolce as ". . . loveliness . . . that fills one's spirit with intimate delight . . ." and *grazia*, which Freedberg described as meaning in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, "Beauty . . . which seduces one unto love . . ."⁶⁶

The obvious implication in these definitions--which were relatively contemporary with Parmigianino's time--is a not-so-subtle sexuality. "Intimate delight" and being seduced "unto love" contain unavoidable sexual connotations. The authors wrote as if they want to succumb to an erotic beauty, which will lead to exciting sexual passion. Freedberg, however, ignored the sexual undertones of *venustà* and *grazia*, even while admitting that *grazia* dominated all other qualities in Parmigianino's art.⁶⁷

Lili Fröhlich-Bum viewed Parmigianino as the "creator of Mannerism" and described his style as a "closed whole."⁶⁸ She also explained that he showed little interest in realism, and that the genius of his work lay in his use of form and the creation of an ideal beauty.⁶⁹ Yet she, too, ignored eroticism.

Among other writers on Parmigianino, the Italian A. O. Quintavalle proposed that the artist created a coherent style from the styles of other, more regional artists, such as Beccafumi, Sodoma, and especially Anselmi. Taking their most universally applicable traits, he then learned his most important lessons from the work of Raphael in Rome.⁷⁰ The resulting style was "rigorous and cerebral" and subordinated narrative elements to a pure abstraction. In his mature work he exhibited a decorative, abstract formalism that achieved a "mystic representation," which is the greatest achievement of his later style.⁷¹

Some later scholars began to examine Parmigianino's iconography, especially in regard to his interest in alchemy. Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco completely re-evaluated Parmigianino's work in terms of the artist's documented interest in alchemy. He proposed to "reexamine the work of

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 9-11

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁸ Fröhlich-Bum, pp. 118, 4.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁷⁰ Armando Ottaviano Quintavalle, *Il Parmigianino* (Milan: Istituto Editoriale, 1948), pp. 14-15.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 17.

Parmigianino considering alchemy not as a biographical ‘incident’ but as a key to reading all the painter’s work.”⁷²

In reality, Parmigianino seeks an alternative to the usual figural world in the alchemical cosmos. In practice the images are always mythological, historical, sacred, or emblematic, but the field is much larger; and above all, in alchemical thought each image may find its justification in the moment when the alchemists, searching for gold, found a system of imaginative mechanisms.⁷³

Fagiolo dell’Arco explained the basic tenets of sixteenth-century alchemy and described its appearance in and influence on the work of Parmigianino. He concluded by characterizing Parmigianino’s style as “experimentalism.”⁷⁴

Parmigianino is a painter who, almost polemically, takes from everything, experiments with each existing form just because the procedure interests him and not the formal material.⁷⁵

Although Fagiolo dell’Arco did touch upon some of the erotic tendencies in Parmigianino’s art (for instance, his use of androgynes),⁷⁶ he, too, did not question the eroticism that is so evident in the art of Parmigianino and of so many other Mannerist artists. Through a better understanding of eroticism’s role in the paintings and drawings of Parmigianino, we can formulate a new conception of its place in Mannerism and in sixteenth-century Italian culture.

⁷² Fagiolo dell’Arco, p. 12.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 74. “In realtà, il Parmigianino cerca nel cosmo alchemico una alternativa all’abituale mondo di figure: in pratica le immagini sono sempre quelle (mitologio, storia, storia sacra, emblematica) ma il campo è molto più largo e, soprattutto, in un pensiero alchemico ogni immagine può trovare la sua giustificazione, dal momento che gli alchimisti cercando l’oro trovarono un sistema dei meccanismi immaginativi.” Translation the author.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 89-90.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 91. “Il Parmigianino è un pittore che, quasi per polemica, prende da tutti, sperimenta ogni forma esistente perché gli interessa appunto il procedimento e non il materiale formale.” Translation the author.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 62-64.

CHAPTER 2

EROTICISM IN PARMIGIANINO'S ART

Parmigianino was born Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola on January 11, 1503, in Parma. His father died when he was two, and his two painter uncles, Pier Ilario and Michele Mazzola, reared the young boy and encouraged an early interest in drawing. In 1521 his uncles sent Francesco to Viadana to avoid the imminent prospect of violence from the military campaigns of the Papal and Imperial forces in the area. He returned to Parma early in 1522. This same year he was awarded a prestigious contract to decorate a chapel of the Cathedral of Parma. At the young age of 19 he was already highly esteemed by his contemporaries.¹

Late in 1524 Parmigianino travelled to Rome in the company of one of his uncles in order to see the works of Raphael and Michelangelo, among others. He brought with him samples of his work, which he presented to Pope Clement. Parmigianino worked in Rome until the Sack in 1527 when he went to Bologna, working there until 1531.²

Parmigianino returned to Parma by May 10, 1531 and agreed to paint frescoes for the Church of Santa Maria della Steccata, but worked only sporadically on this project—in fact, so sporadically that in 1539 he fled Parma to escape legal action by the Confraternity of the Steccata. He moved to Casalmaggiore where he worked until his death on August 24, 1540 “by a severe fever and by a cruel flux,” according to Vasari.³

Parmigianino's oeuvre is usually divided into four periods based upon the town in which he was working at the time: the first Parma period, to 1524; the Roman period, 1524-27; the Bologna period, 1527-31; and the second Parma period, including his final days in Casalmaggiore, 1530-40. Works that the artist left undated or that have no documentation to support a specific date are usually ascribed to one of these more general periods.

Like most artists of his time, Parmigianino painted in a variety of genres. He was, after all, working for patrons, whose demands could range from portraits to altarpieces. His paintings comprise portraits, mythological scenes, and religious subjects. Parmigianino's drawings include all of these subjects and also genre scenes, figure studies and a variety of peculiar and less easily classified works.

Eroticism cropped up frequently in Parmigianino's art. It was not limited to one particular type of subject. It crossed the bounds of both media and iconography, even nudging its way into

¹ Freedberg, *Parmigianino*, p. 35. Freedberg took most of his biography from Vasari. I use Freedberg rather than Vasari directly because Freedberg provided dates not in Vasari, and his biography incorporated additional research.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 58-61.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

otherwise straightforward portraits. As we shall see, Parmigianino's brand of eroticism was sensually based and was aided by the rhythmic conventions and elegant elongation of his style. It began early in his career with the *Story of Acteon* frescoes of 1523 in the Rocca Sanvitale in Fontanellato and continued to play a role through his Roman period. It increased in Mannerist peculiarity in the Bolognese period, and further increased in frequency and strangeness in his final years in Parma and Casalmaggiore.

Eroticism was not omnipresent in Parmigianino's work; it would be a mistake to consider it so. Obviously, the limitations of patrons and subject prohibited the consistent use of sexual suggestiveness. Nevertheless, he managed to inject eroticism into his work regularly. The eclectic nature of the painter's iconography—especially in drawings—presents obstacles to simple classification of the forms that eroticism took in his work. However, certain trends do distinguish themselves.

The first of these is the way in which he depicted figures. Parmigianino was capable of rendering very masculine males, very feminine females, and also asexual and androgynous figures. The very fact that he depicted such clearly male and female figures suggests that in his pictures with androgynes, he was making a conscious choice. Examples of his muscular, clearly male figures are seen in his depictions of St. Jerome in *The Vision of St. Jerome* (Fig. 7), and of St. Zachary in *Madonna and Child with St. Zachary, the Magdalen, and John the Baptist*. (Fig. 8). His delicate, highly feminine women are shown in the graceful *Madonna of the Long Neck* (Fig. 9) and in the *Madonna della Rosa* (Fig. 10). Androgynes—such as the figure of Cupid in *Cupid Carving his Bow* (Fig. 11)—are also common. The artist's facility in depicting sexual difference underscores the fact that a choice was made when he created a sexually ambiguous figure. The fusion of the sexes is an ancient concept and possesses, among its many other connotations, an element of somewhat bizarre eroticism. The union of male and female in a single being is easily interpreted as equivalent to the union achieved in sexual intercourse.

Another type of eroticism used by the artist was the sensuality that pervaded Parmigianino's oeuvre. Sydney Freedberg recognized this sensuality, which he distinguished from sensuousness.⁴ He also recognized the eroticism of Parmigianino's use of revealing, clinging drapery, but attributed it to "the complex, oversensitive and even somewhat morbid reaction of Parmigianino to the physical world."⁵ This seems a highly mystifying reaction on Freedberg's part to the eroticism evident in Parmigianino's painting. The artist's sensuality is also sensuous, and it is made so partly by the use of the clinging drapery, which reveals the outline of the bodies of the stylized inhabitants of his paintings. Such an eroticism is hardly a "morbid reaction." In fact, it is both playful and reflective of the sexual morés of the time, as we shall see.

To some degree the widespread sensuality in Parmigianino's art is due to the conventions of his style. His predilection for smooth, silky texture, long, undulating line, and figural stylization contributes to an overall impression of sensuality. Certain details of his pictorial style are suggestive in a more straightforward, directly sexual way. For instance, the languorously downcast eyes of his Madonnas (and many other of his female figures) seem almost coquettish.

⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

Beyond these more or less subtle brands of eroticism, Parmigianino frequently used an iconography that was sexually explicit. In his drawings, especially, the depiction of figures engaged in sexual activity occurred too often to be coincidental or insignificant. Some of these subjects were representations of men with erections. Others were couples or groups of figures engaging in heterosexual and homosexual foreplay. Parmigianino is especially notable for his exploitation of the sexuality of animals, adding overtones of bestiality to his predilection for the erotic.

To examine specific instances of eroticism in Parmigianino's oeuvre, we should begin with his drawings, which are not as well known as his paintings.⁶ Some of Parmigianino's most typical androgynes are found in these drawings. In *Nude Youth Holding Some Drapery* (Fig. 12) we assume at first glance that the figure is male. After all, it has male genitals. But the wide hips and more than a hint of breasts make the figure effeminate, as does the affected positioning of the hand holding the drapery.

A more striking example is his drawing of *A Herm* (Fig. 13). Again, the genitals are male, and the figure sports a long beard. However, the slender, effeminate body has large breasts with prominent nipples, which show themselves through the delicate, gauzy drapery. If this is indeed a representation of an antique herm, as A. E. Popham has deemed it,⁷ then the artist was perhaps only depicting what he saw. However, Parmigianino consciously chose this peculiar and unusual hermaphroditic herm.

A similar choice was made in his drawing of a *Statue of Apollo* (Fig. 14). A. E. Popham explained that this was a drawing after the statue of Apollo Cithrodaeus presently in the Naples Museum. However, in the early sixteenth century, it was in the house of Fabio Sassio in Rome, where Parmigianino copied it. Significantly, for centuries the statue was thought to represent Hermaphrodite.⁸ The gracefully posed figure has a man's penis and testicles, but the rest of its features are definitely feminine. The wide, fleshy hips, female breasts, narrow shoulders, long curly hair and feminine facial features contribute in creating a figure which looks hermaphroditic, even if it is actually an Apollo. Because similarly androgynous Apollos existed in antique sculpture, in this case Parmigianino was not inventing his own androgynes. However, he was consciously choosing to depict this antique sculpture among all those from which he could have chosen. He thereby clearly showed his fascination with the subject of sexual fusion.

In other drawings Parmigianino portrayed male figures in a state of sexual arousal, although often in a non-sexual setting. A small drawing of a *Man Gesturing* (Fig. 15) from the Bolognese period shows a youth making a possibly obscene gesture. The drapery in front of him seems to fall from his erect penis. Nothing else in the picture could be supporting the drapery in such a way.

⁶ Questions of authorship are really outside the scope of this examination of eroticism in Parmigianino's oeuvre. Fortunately, others have laid excellent groundwork in this regard. Sydney Freedberg's *Parmigianino: His Works in Painting* established and defined the limits of Parmigianino's painted oeuvre. A. E. Popham accomplished this same feat for the artist's drawings in the *Catalogue of Drawings by Parmigianino*, 3 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971). In questions of authorship and chronology, I have generally accepted the judgments of these two experts. I explain any disagreements I might have with them in the text or in the notes. In one or two cases, I have accepted drawings not in Popham's catalogue, and I explain these cases in the notes. Certain disputed dates and works may also be discussed in the notes.

⁷ Popham, 1: 220.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 165.

In the *Revenge of Vulcan*⁹ (Fig. 16) the figure on the left shows his erect penis, possibly aroused in some way by the other two figures. The treatment of the drapery exhibits Parmigianino's typically sensuous line quality. The translucency of the fabric as it crosses the right male figure's groin evidences Freedberg's observations on Parmigianino's use of drapery to achieve an erotic of "half-concealment."

A sketch of *Three Male Figures, Two with Lutes* (Fig. 17) includes one figure with an abnormally large penis. Although flaccid, the unusual size of this figure's organ draws attention in the same way an erection would. Parmigianino seems to have added this large penis on top of an earlier, smaller one (still visible nearer to the body). The size of the genitals would suggest that the figure was Priapus, but Priapus was usually depicted as short and unattractive, and not associated with music. Parmigianino here seemed to give a sample of his own prurient interests.

The *Warriors Congratulating Each Other* (Fig. 18) seems rife with homosexual eroticism. At the left four pairs of men embrace. Popham proposed that they were celebrating a victory.¹⁰ However, the intimacy of the men's embraces is sexually suggestive. One pair kisses on the mouth, their hands near each other's groins. Another couple in the background hold each other almost desperately.

A drawing from Budapest, *A Pair of Lovers* (Fig. 19) depicts two nude figures. One sits on the other's lap, legs sprawled forward, while they kiss. The figures' genders are indeterminate. The drawing is small and no more than a sketch. However, the musculature and short hair suggests that the figures are male. In another drawing of *Two Lovers* (Fig. 20) the artist very explicitly depicted heterosexual foreplay.¹¹ A woman straddles the leg of a man whom she is kissing. Both figures are nude; their legs are entwined. The woman reaches between the man's legs. Although this portion of the drawing is blurred and faded (probably erased by a prudish collector), she seemingly masturbates her lover. The man's face seems almost like Pan or a satyr because of his long, curly sideburns and beard and because of the suggestion of horns. The presence of the eagle seems to imply a mythological source for the scene, but the clues are too vague for positive identification. The figures' soft, flowing contours complement the erotic subject. This drawing is both explicitly sexual in subject and highly sensual in execution.

A more readily identifiable subject is his drawing of *Priapus and Lotis* (Fig. 21). This unusually large drawing was one of several presentation drawings done in the artist's later, second Parma period. Priapus lifts the drapery from the unsuspecting Lotis while Silenus is on his donkey in the background. Parmigianino's depiction lacks Priapus's identifying attribute—his enormous penis. Evidently erased and removed by a conservative collector, all that remains is a large, dark smudge. This subject was not common in Renaissance art. Parmigianino's depiction—as originally

⁹ This drawing has been titled *The Revenge of Vulcan* by the Galleria Nazionale in Parma (which owns the work), and Popham concurred (ibid., 1: 172). However, in view of the sexual excitation exhibited by the figure of "Vulcan" on the left, this identification is questionable. Why would an act of revenge arouse him? The couple does not really seem caught in a net, but rather all of the figures seem to be caught in a swirl of translucent drapery. I do not, however, have an alternative identification.

¹⁰ Popham, 1: 119.

¹¹ This drawing is not included in Popham's catalog but is given to Parmigianino by the Gabinetto dei disegni e stampe of the Galleria degli Uffizi, an attribution with which I concur.

drawn—obviously left little to the imagination. His interest in human sexuality is again displayed through the medium of a mythological subject.

Perhaps Parmigianino's most startling drawing is *The Lower Part of Two Male Figures* (Fig. 22).¹² One figure has an erect penis, which the other figure masturbates. He seems not to have a penis himself; there is only a blur above his testicles. However, the faint trace of a base of a broken-off penis and the presence of a support behind the two figures point to a possible source in antique statuary. Perhaps Parmigianino was drawing a sculpture he encountered which is unknown today, or perhaps this drawing was his own invention. In either case he showed a decided interest in homosexual imagery.

The next group of drawings, while less explicit, is in a way more peculiar. These drawings involve the iconography of sexuality and animals, ranging from mildly suggestive to startling. A work such as *Philyra and Saturn in the Form of a Horse* (Fig. 23) shows the beautiful nymph caressing the horse's neck and preparing to kiss him. Her nudity heightens the eroticism of her actions. But this may not actually be Saturn and Philyra. According to myth, Saturn and Philyra both turned into horses to escape the wrath of Rhea,¹³ and here only one figure is a horse. Perhaps Parmigianino was once again just showing his own erotic interests.

A peculiar drawing of a dog (Fig. 24) seemingly shows that Parmigianino's interests in androgynes extended to animals. The clearly rendered dog has male genitalia, but large, prominent teats like those of a female dog. The injection of this sort of gender confusion into animals moves from the unusual to the bizarre.

A Man Holding Up a Large Bitch (Fig. 25) from the second Parma period, shows a man holding his dog. Parmigianino has taken great care to emphasize the teats and genitals of this dog. This drawing is not specifically erotic (neither is the previously discussed drawing of a dog). But here the emphasis on the dog's sexuality seems inexplicable in terms of iconographic need. Only in knowing the sexual interests of the artist does this drawing make sense as part of an artistic survey of a sexual world.

In the *Dog Mounting the Left Leg of a Shirtless Youth* (Fig. 26), the dog's own sexual drives come into play. Here, Parmigianino drew a semi-nude youth with a large dog mounting his leg. Now, although this is certainly something that dogs are known to do, it is not a common (or by some standards, appropriate) subject for art. By its very depiction, Parmigianino has given the scene an importance beyond the fact of its everyday occurrence. The importance thus lent to the subject causes increased consideration of what is really happening. And what is really happening is the sexual expression of an animal with a human. The youth's semi-nudity adds to the sexual suggestiveness and to the undertones of bestiality.

¹² This drawing is given to Parmigianino by Popham (no doubt reluctantly, since he refers to it as "indecent." (1:161). In the Cabinet des dessins of the Louvre, it is listed as "d'après" Parmigianino. After careful examination, I have concluded that both stylistically and iconographically it seems to be by the hand of Parmigianino.

¹³ N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970; reprint ed., 1978), p. 825.

For the most part, Parmigianino's paintings bear a less overt strain of eroticism than the drawings. Since the paintings were, as nearly as we can tell, always commissions, and were to be seen in public, they had to retain some degree of propriety. Nevertheless, Parmigianino's interest in sensuality and the erotic was still present, and, in some cases, may even have been encouraged by the patron.

The erotic treatment of subjects began in the earliest paintings. The frescoes of the Rocca Sanvitale in Fontanellato, dating to 1523, depict the story of Diana and Acteon (Figs. 27-30). Here we can already see the beginnings of many of the erotic qualities that distinguish Parmigianino's work. The narrative begins over a window, where an allegorical figure (possibly Demeter) holds a stem of grain (Fig. 27).¹⁴ The story starts at the right with the hounds and the hunters on their way. The next wall depicts Acteon pursuing a maiden, grasping her gown (Fig. 28). The following wall shows us Acteon transformed as the goddess Diana, disturbed at her bath, splashes him with water (Fig. 29). Two nymphs behind Diana hold and caress each other. Distinctly feminine, the almost nude left nymph gazes languidly into the eyes of the totally nude nymph on the right. She touches her own breast, and the dark-haired figure strokes her hair and shoulder. This is a scene heavily laden with lesbian eroticism. Additionally, we find that in the process of transformation, Acteon has taken on the garments of the woman he was chasing. The transformation into an animal is complicated by an accompanying sexual transformation.¹⁵ The story concludes as Acteon is devoured by his own hounds (Fig. 30). The entire sequence is decorated with putti hugging and squeezing each other, whose sensual appeal cannot be ignored.

Even in portraits Parmigianino cannot resist injecting elements of eroticism. The *Portrait of a Man* (Fig. 31) from the National Gallery in London includes a grisaille depiction of sculpture in the background. The subject is a man who holds and seems to caress a woman. No positive identification has been made for the portrait although the two amorous figures have been tentatively identified as Venus and Mars.¹⁶

The Madonna with St. Margaret and Other Saints of 1527-29 (Fig. 32) is a fairly straightforward religious subject. However, here Parmigianino again reveals his fascination with androgynes and transexualism, for according to *The Golden Legend*, St. Margaret was a transvestite who wore the habit of a monk most of her life and who lived the life of a male hermit, her disguise only being discovered upon her death.¹⁷ The influence of patronage in the choice of such a subject cannot be

¹⁴ Copertini proposed that it might represent Peace; Giovanni Copertini, *Il Parmigianino*, 2 vols. (Parma: Fresching Editore, 1932), 1: 46. A. G. Quintavalle believed it could be abundance or hospitality, but that it was definitely a portrait of the patroness Paola Gonzaga. See Augusta Ghidiglia Quintavalle, *Gli affreschi giovanili del Parmigianino* (Milan: "Silvana" Editorial d'arte, 1968), p. 91.

¹⁵ Previous writers seem to have been unconcerned about this peculiar deviation from Ovid, although Copertini noted that Parmigianino did not scrupulously follow the Ovidian source, *ibid.*, 1: 45. David Brown, one of the few to remark upon this change of gender attributed it to "the ambiguity of the hunter and the hunted in Ovid's tale." David Alan Brown, "Parmigianino at Fontanellato," *FMR* 1 (June 1984): 142-43. This seems a forced explanation. Equally surprising is Copertini's contention that the pursued nymph was the sister of Diana. Copertini 1: 45. A. G. Quintavalle ignored it completely. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁶ Paola Rossi, *L'opera completa del Parmigianino* (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1980), p. 92.

¹⁷ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, translated and adapted by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripberger (1941; reprint ed., New York: Longmans, Green and Co., Inc., 1969), pp. 613-14. Although *The Golden Legend* includes three St. Margarets, their stories often are quite similar and easily mixed up. Although St. Margaret of

forgotten, but in the absence of further documentation the inclusion of St. Margaret seems to be more than coincidental in the context of Parmigianino's interests in androgynes and hermaphrodites.

The 1530 *Madonna and Child with St. Zachary, the Magdalen and the Infant St. John* (Fig. 8) is another religious painting with erotic undertones. Looking closely at the figures of John and Christ, the two children seem to engage themselves in a peculiarly sexual embrace. The Christ Child grabs the young John's face forcefully, pulling it near him and betraying his strength by the way his fingers dig into John's flesh. John, in turn, leans forward in his rushed eagerness to reach the Child, whom he grabs and holds with equal fierceness. The picture seems filled with a passion unusual for such a scene. In comparison, Raphael's *La belle jardinière* (Fig. 33) shows the restrained, worshipful mood that is more common in scenes of the young Christ and John.

One of Parmigianino's most important and most erotic works is the *Cupid Carving his Bow* (Fig. 11) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Vasari related that the artist painted this work shortly into his second Parma period for the Knight Baiardo (Francesco Boiardi), a friend of the artist. It depicts:

. . . Cupid making a bow . . . with two seated infants at his feet, one taking the other by the arm and laughing, trying to touch Cupid, and one is afraid and weeps, indicating that he does not wish to warm himself at the fire of love.¹⁸

Frederick Hartt suggested that the books on which Cupid stands symbolize love's triumph over knowledge.¹⁹ However, the painting has psycho-sexual implications resulting from the bizarre use of eroticism. Most basically, the act of Cupid, a god of love, carving an enormous bow—ostensibly to launch an arrow that will incite passion—presents a disturbingly violent image of love. Between Cupid's legs (this perspective is in itself erotic) one putto sadistically forces the other towards the painful heat of love. The expression of lecherous pleasure on the aggressive putto and the weeping agony of the other only add to the effectual sadism of the picture. Paul Barolsky noted the painting's sadistic overtones, writing:

. . . the conjunction of love and pain here would no doubt have brought to mind for the sixteenth-century beholder the cliché, sometimes beautifully expressed in poetry and other literary genres, that love involves pain.²⁰

The large Cupid himself is another of Parmigianino's androgynous figures. Though he seems to be male, one might withhold judgment after noting the wide, fleshy hips and stomach, narrow chest and shoulders, and more than a hint of breasts below the arm. As a male, however, the knife he holds would be distinctly phallic; simply extend the lines of the handle to their source at the base of Cupid's abdomen.

Parmigianino's famous *Madonna of the Long Neck* (Fig. 9) of 1535 includes a number of unusual erotic elements. First, the clinging drapery of the Madonna reveals both her nipples and her navel. This is an example of the erotic of "half-concealment" that is achieved through the drapery

Antioch vanquished a dragon, which we see in the painting (p. 353), another Margaret was St. Pelagia, who also hailed from Antioch and also wore men's clothes (p. 611).

¹⁸ Vasari, 3: 11-12.

¹⁹ Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., and New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1981), p. 575.

²⁰ Paul Barolsky, *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* (Columbia, MO and London: University of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 127.

and that was noted by Freedberg.²¹ Second, the attendants to the left are sexually ambiguous. The full-length figure carrying the vase initially seems female with its curly, flowing hair and long, smooth legs, but this is contradicted by its square jaw and relatively thick neck (in contrast to the delicate elongation of the Madonna's neck). One breast is exposed, but it is undeveloped, like that of a child or a boy. Although the bizarrely elongated Christ child's foot points directly to the figure's crotch, no genitalia of any kind are visible. The child, on the other hand, does possess genitalia, although rather vaguely depicted. Another young attendant cranes his or her head forward to see the child, and seems to direct its gaze directly to the groin. Leo Steinberg might have explained this as an attempt to demonstrate the physical incarnation of Christ by an emphasis on the genitalia, as he discovered in other Renaissance art.²² However, this is probably not the only source, as we shall see.

The *Madonna della Rosa* (Fig. 10) exhibits, according to Freedberg, an "extreme sensuality and worldliness."²³ It was commissioned by Pietro Aretino²⁴ and was so popular that it was copied at least fifty times.²⁵ It was once thought to portray Venus and Cupid,²⁶ a reasonable assumption, given the figure's sensuality. Her nipples and breasts are clearly visible through her clothing. The Christ child's coquettish grin and lack of identifying attributes cause him to seem more like the god of love than the Savior of Mankind.

A rather mysterious print has also been attributed to Parmigianino (Fig. 34).²⁷ Located in the British Museum, it is called a *Witches' Sabbath* and shows us a motley assortment of demons, monsters and other fantastic creatures which surround a hooded figure mounted on an enormous flying phallus. Given the bizarre nature of this print, one must inevitably question the attribution. However, we know that Parmigianino's erotic interests were extensive. We also know that he was interested in alchemy, which could entail the study of the occult. The style seems close to that of his drawings, though less like that of other autograph prints. Thus, if not by Parmigianino himself, it could be a copy after Parmigianino.

We see, then, that eroticism does indeed penetrate the art of Parmigianino. Does this eroticism sometimes result from iconographic necessity, or does it derive from other artistic, psychological or cultural forces?

²¹ Freedberg, *Parmigianino*, p. 17.

²² Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983). This is the main point of Steinberg's book, one that he makes repeatedly with a variety of examples.

²³ Freedberg, *Parmigianino*, p. 80.

²⁴ Roskill, pp. 41-42.

²⁵ André Chastel, *The Crisis of the Renaissance, 1520-1600*, translated by Peter Price (Geneva: Editions Albert Skira, 1968), p. 89.

²⁶ Quintavalle, p. 95.

²⁷ Peter Webb, *The Erotic Arts*, revised ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), p. 120, originally brought this print to my attention and assigned it to Parmigianino. I viewed the print in the British Museum. It is kept in the locked cabinets in a portfolio by itself—except for a photocopy of a revised version of the print in which the giant phallus is transformed into the less shocking image of a monster. This version was reproduced by Popham who called it a probable reproduction of an actual drawing (Popham, 1: 258). The British Museum lists it as "Attributed to Parmigianino." This is another case in which, if we recognize Parmigianino's interests in the erotic and the occult as part of what may define his oeuvre, we may attribute the print to him with more certainty.

The above-mentioned book by Leo Steinberg has shown that artists were indeed perfectly willing to utilize sexuality in the interests of expressing certain religious themes, especially the incarnation of Christ. In the case of Parmigianino, however, Steinberg's primary argument seems inapplicable. Eroticism in Parmigianino is not limited to the body of Christ, but rather includes mythological and genre subjects. It seems to represent a broader, more general interest in all things sexual and erotic.

In some cases, however, Parmigianino's eroticism may be iconographically linked with his interest in alchemy. Vasari reported that Parmigianino almost ruined his career because of his feverish experimentation with the arcane science of alchemy.

. . . if he had not conceived the whim to solidify mercury and so make himself rich, he would have been a unique artist.

. . . he had begun to study alchemy, neglecting painting in the hope of enriching himself quickly by congealing mercury.

Had he but put aside the follies of alchemy, he would have been one of the rarest masters of our age.²⁸

Alchemy is the ancient progenitor of modern chemistry. Alchemists, through a combination of experimentation and philosophical reflection, sought the fabled Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance that could turn lead into gold, as well as heal the sick and perform a host of other miraculous functions. Alchemists went through an elaborate series of steps to purify and process the ingredients that were to become the Philosopher's Stone. This purifying of materials was accompanied by the philosophical purification of the alchemist, who, through his understanding of the mystical procedures of alchemical philosophy, would reach a spiritual revelation on a level far beyond that of the average human.²⁹

Part of Parmigianino's interest in androgynes and sexual ambiguity may be due to his interest in alchemy. Jerome Schwartz explained an important element of Renaissance alchemical belief: "The figure of the Androgyne or Hermaphrodite was also well known in alchemy as the symbol of the transformation of matter."³⁰ This symbolism was based upon the achievement of the philosopher's stone involving the fusion of opposite principles. In his paintings and drawings of androgynes, then, Parmigianino may well have used the androgyne as a symbol of the union of opposites.

Schwartz also explained that until the second half of the sixteenth century, Neo-platonic ideas of the androgyne (delineated by Ficino) suggested:

. . . as well as the idea of sexual ambiguity or duality, the notion of microcosmic correspondences between the moral virtues of the soul and the physical influences it receives from astral bodies.³¹

²⁸ Vasari, 3: 6, 12, 13.

²⁹ For more on alchemy, see Neil Powell, *Alchemy, the Ancient Science* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976).

³⁰ Jerome Schwartz, "Aspects of Androgyny in the Renaissance," in *Human Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, University of Pittsburgh Publications on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, vol. 4, ed. by Douglas Radcliff-Umstead (Pittsburgh: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1978), p. 123. Nearly all alchemical texts note this fact.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Ficino saw androgynes as “the very condition of the soul.”³² Androgyny was present in diverse areas of sixteenth-century thought extending from Neo-platonism to the Cabal. Schwartz saw in all of these disciplines a use of the androgyne as signifying the luminous potency of the Deity.³³ Plato, in the *Symposium*, wrote that man was originally created as an androgyne. Cabalic philosophy viewed God as androgynous, and man, too, as originally androgynous, being made in God’s image. And in the Hermetic tradition the androgyne was the state of life; in Asclepius Hermes Trismegistus wrote that not only God was androgynous, but also “all things animate and inanimate, for both sexes teem with reproductive power, and their binding power, or rather unity . . . is beyond understanding.” Many precedents existed in Greek and Roman literature of the myth of gender confusion and androgyny: Hercules and Queen Omphale, Agdystis, Hippolytus and Phaedra, and Teiresias, as well as Hermaphroditus himself.³⁴ The occult sciences in the sixteenth century were well-known, if not necessarily widely practiced.³⁵

Parmigianino, then, was probably aware of the iconographic implications of the androgyne, and frequently used it because of the depth of its meaning. Since androgynes represented man’s original state before the Fall, the androgynous attendants in *Madonna of the Long Neck* (Fig. 9) could have paralleled man’s state of grace before the Fall and his new salvation through the Child of the Madonna. In *Cupid Carving His Bow* (Fig. 11) Cupid, as the god of love, would necessarily have carried implications of sexual union. The union of the sexes was symbolized by the androgyne. Cupid’s androgynous appearance could thus be seen as an attribute of his identity.

Other erotic aspects of *Cupid Carving His Bow* may have similarly arisen from iconographic necessity. The violent, painful image of love this picture suggests and the deadly bow Cupid carves may relate to the Renaissance idea that love involves pain.³⁶ Edgar Wind explained how, in Renaissance thought, Cupid could be a god of death. “To die was to be loved by a god, and partake through him of eternal bliss Death appears as communion with a god through Love.”³⁷ The sadistic portrayal of Cupid may have been intended to refer to such ideas.

The androgyny and eroticism of the *Madonna of the Long Neck* (Fig. 9) have also been explained iconographically. Elizabeth Cropper suggested that the idealized beauty evident in the figures of the Madonna of the Long Neck related to the similarly androgynous nature of beauty described by Agnolo Firenzuola in the *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne*, completed in 1542.³⁸ In this context the androgynous attendants would represent an ideal of beauty. Although literary ideals of androgynous beauty certainly must have had their effect, they hardly seem enough to have created

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 123.

³⁴ Elémire Zolla, *The Androgyne: Reconciliation of Male and Female* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), pp. 10, 20-21, 26, 17-19.

³⁵ Evidence of the preponderance of occultism in the Renaissance is presented by Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) and by Viviana Paques, *Les sciences occultes d'après les documents littéraires italiens du XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1971).

³⁶ See note 20 above.

³⁷ Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1968), pp. 152-59.

³⁸ Elizabeth Cropper, “On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, *Petrarchismo*, and the Vernacular Style,” *Art Bulletin* 58 (September 1976): 376.

Parmigianino's overwhelming interest in them. Cropper also explained another reference to ideal beauty. In the Renaissance the vase was considered an ideal form. The Madonna's figure echoes the shape of a vase. This relation to a vase also has a symbolic function: in the Song of Songs the vase of balsam was the vessel for Grace. As the vase was full of divine Grace, so also was the Virgin in her ideal (divine) beauty.³⁹ This, however, does not really explain why Parmigianino found it necessary to show the Madonna's nipples through her clothes, or why the Child's genitalia are so vaguely depicted.

Ute Davitt-Asmus has proposed a similar explanation of the picture. In a long, complex essay she outlined how the painting illustrated the writings of the early Christian mystic Origen. Focusing first on the large vase held by the attendant, she noted that the vase originally was inscribed with a cross, representing the eventual fate of the Child.⁴⁰ She, too, saw the vessel as a symbol of the container of the Balsam of Christ, having spiritual contents and functioning as a symbol of the Passion. It was different in this context from other variants such as the unguent jar of Mary Magdalene.⁴¹ Like the urn, Christ was the container for a sort of salve, but for the soul of mankind.⁴² Asmus related the androgynous figures (which she saw as youthful and hence just sexually undeveloped) to Origen's commentaries on the appropriateness of young, innocent souls in the mystery of the love between Christ and the church. Maiden-like figures and their correspondingly pure souls also played a role in these writings.⁴³ These young souls, or "*adulescentulae*" were among the first to follow Christ. Their childlike susceptibility suggested the symbolic retinue of the Bride in the Song of Solomon. Their presence corresponded to the way earthly persons could also be present in this sacred scene by means of contemplation.⁴⁴ As the spokesperson for the inner man, these *adulescentulae* played a crucial role in the painting.

Here in the interpretation of the Song of Solomon, Origen not only unites the "name" of Christ (which is connected with the Balsam), with the "word of God made flesh," but also describes the sacred-historical event itself as a comprehensive love relationship of which sensual expressions, however, concern exclusively the psychic and spiritual capacities of the participants in it. On the one hand, the incarnate "logos," on the other, the "inner man." Origen outlines in straightforward fashion a model of this "interior man" for whom his inner, psychic experience and perception—analogue to the five senses of the outer body—stands at his disposal as an "interior vision," an "inner sense of sight" as well as an "inner sense" of hearing, smell, taste, touch.⁴⁵

³⁹ Ibid., p. 381.

⁴⁰ Ute Davitt Asmus, "Parmigianino: Madonna dal Collo Lungo," in *Corpus Quasi Vas: Beiträge zur Ikonographie der Italienischen Renaissance* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1977), p. 116.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 118.

⁴² Ibid., p. 128.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 121

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 124, 120-21.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 121-22. "Hier, bei der Deutung der salomonischen Liebesdichtung, wird von Origenes nicht nur der ‚Name‘ Christi, der als ‚Balsam‘ ausgeschüttet wird, mit dem ‚Wort Gottes, das Fleisch ward‘, in eins gesetzt, sondern dieser heilsgeschichtliche Vorgang selbst als ein umfassendes Liebesverhältnis beschrieben, dessen sinnliche Ausdrücke indes ausschliesslich den seelischen und geistigen Fähigkeiten der an ihm beteiligten Partner gelten: auf der einen Seite der fleischgewordene ‚Logos‘, auf der anderen der ‚innere Mensch‘. Origenes entwirft geradezu ein Modell dieses ‚interior homo‘, dem für sein innerseelisches Erleben und Erkennen—analog zu den fünf Sinnen des äusseren Körpers—ein ‚interior visus‘, ein ‚innerer Gesichtssinn‘, ebenso wie ein ‚innerer‘ Gehör-, Geruch-, Geschmack- und Tatsinn zur Verfügung stehen." Translation the author, with the assistance of Madlyn Kahr.

According to Asmus, Parmigianino translated Origen's *adulescentulae* into the youthful attendants to the left in the painting. He would have been aware of the mystic's work because the first printed editions of Origen were circulating at the time and were current in humanist circles.⁴⁶

Asmus thus explained the attendants' androgynous appearance in terms of early Christian theology. They were meant to represent the adolescents—the youthful, sexually undeveloped followers of Christ. In the context of Parmigianino's diverse array of androgynes and eroticism, however, this explanation seems unlikely. Although Parmigianino was undoubtedly sophisticated, such complicated theological twists and turns (although Mannerist in their refined, intellectual nature) seem to inform no other work. Asmus analyzed this painting alone, outside of the context of the artist's other paintings, and as a result she reached some rather farfetched conclusions. Although Parmigianino's patron may have given him a complicated program to illustrate, many of the preliminary drawings do not utilize the young attendants, but use angels. Parmigianino seems to have been free to develop his own design outside the guidelines of such a strictly planned program for the subject.

In contrast, Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco's alchemical interpretation rings true in a way that Asmus's theological explanation does not. Because Vasari wrote repeatedly of Parmigianino's interest in alchemy, reading the androgynes as alchemical symbols, or as alchemically influenced, is more logical. As Fagiolo dell'Arco explained, the alchemist sought to unite opposites into the one. The resulting philosopher's stone was always ambivalent. Thus, the fruit of the alchemist's efforts, the philosopher's stone, was hermaphroditic, the hermetic androgyne.⁴⁷ Because Parma had a history of occult and alchemical studies—from Biagio Pelacani to Basinio da Parma (an astrologer) to Giorgio Anselmi (who wrote on magic and alchemy in the mid-fourteenth century),⁴⁸ Parma was an ideal location for the young artist to learn of alchemy.

Fagiolo dell'Arco went so far as to interpret the Fontanellato frescoes as an “allegory for initiates,” in which Diana represented the moon and the feminine principles—silver and other elements. The stag was the soul, seen alchemically in the forest (the hermetic forest of the initiate). The stag also symbolized Mercury,⁴⁹ an important element in the alchemical process.

Claudio Mutti also viewed the frescoes as an alchemical allegory. He wrote that Acteon's metamorphosis was, in alchemical lore, a symbol of the sublimation of mercury. The goddess, purified in water, represented the sixth step in the alchemical process. The goddess's virginity was an attribute of the “*materia prima*,” the basic matter of the universe.⁵⁰

Fagiolo dell'Arco even found Parmigianino's drawings of dogs to be alchemical symbols. In explaining the *Man Holding Up a Large Bitch* (Fig. 25) Fagiolo dell'Arco described the dog as a “saturnine” attribute (dogs being the astrological attribute of Saturn). Alchemically, the dog was also a symbol of the achievement of the “opus,”⁵¹ the philosopher's stone. Perhaps the artist was

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

⁴⁷ Fagiolo dell'Arco, pp. 62-63, 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp 18-19.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 36-37, 24.

⁵⁰ Claudio Mutti, *Pittura e alchimia: il linguaggio ermetico del Parmigianino* (Parma: Edizioni all'insegna del Veltro, 1978), pp. 16-17, 25, 34.

⁵¹ Fagiolo dell'Arco, pp. 34-35.

projecting his desire to achieve this end, or perhaps he was expressing his delight in what he saw as some incremental success in that direction.

These two writers saw the iconography of Parmigianino's work as basically alchemical in meaning. Was Parmigianino's use of androgynes solely a vehicle for alchemical imagery, or were other factors at work? I submit that alchemy was an influence on the artist rather than the sole source for his hermetic images. We should not view his paintings as analogs to alchemical formulae; rather, they are suggestive of alchemy, as they are of many other ideas. In his paintings and drawings, Parmigianino was likely attracted to alchemical symbolism; he was not, however, making his art an allegory of this hermetic discipline. He was undoubtedly aware that his androgynes could be interpreted as symbols for the philosopher's stone. He was also aware of the Neo-platonic implications of the androgyne, as well as its connotations of ideal beauty. As a Mannerist artist, Parmigianino would have delighted in the many-faceted image of the androgyne.

Alchemical interpretations give us an understanding of just one potential source for one aspect of sexuality in Parmigianino's art: his use of androgynes. They do not, however, explain the preponderance of playful eroticism that so often crops up in other depictions, unrelated to alchemy. Why did Parmigianino choose such images? The answer lies in the cultural influences of the artist's environment.

CHAPTER III

**CULTURAL INFLUENCES AND EROTICISM'S IMPORTANCE
FOR THE MANNERIST STYLE**

Various aspects of Parmigianino's environment, both artistic and cultural, undoubtedly spurred his interest in eroticism. For example, the influence of other contemporaneous artists who used erotic imagery played a role. Even more important was the impact of the broader cultural and social setting of sixteenth-century Italy. According to Sydney Freedberg, in the Italy of the 1520s and 30s one could find "the diffusion among some of Italy's cultural elite . . . of a current of irreligious worldliness which was an extreme product of the humanism of the High Renaissance."¹ "Worldly" was the word Freedberg chose, but licentious might be equally applicable. Part of the dichotomy that seemed to characterize the Renaissance was that the humanist could simultaneously consider himself a gentleman, a *cortegiano*, and still engage in what would today be considered the most absurdly self-indulgent and dangerous vices. Evidence of a social and cultural context for erotic expression is found in literature and philosophy, as well as in historical anecdotes, and provides a means for a deeper understanding of Parmigianino's eroticism.

First, however, the influence of other artists upon Parmigianino should be examined. Certainly the foremost stylistic influence was that of his fellow Parmesan, Correggio. Although Vasari did not write that Correggio was Parmigianino's teacher, writing only that he studied under "excellent masters,"² Correggio has been almost universally recognized as important in the development of Parmigianino's style.³ Correggio's influence is evident in the soft modeling of features in the early works, in the distinctive downcast eyes so often used in the female figures of both painters, and in Parmigianino's use of various artistic motifs and devices of the older painter.⁴ An analysis of eroticism reveals that Correggio's influence was not only stylistic, but iconographic, as Correggio's own work was full of erotic figures. Works such as his series on the loves of Jupiter clearly showed Correggio's own interests in the erotic. *Jupiter and Io* (Fig. 35) is one of the most sensual and erotic depictions of love in the history of art. *Jupiter and Ganymede* (Fig. 36) depicted the infamous mythological abduction, and associated violence with sex in a way that recalls Parmigianino's *Cupid Carving His Bow* (Fig. 11). Not coincidentally, both Correggio's and Parmigianino's paintings utilized the same tall, rectangular format and were almost the same size.⁵

¹ Freedberg, *Parmigianino*, p. 8.

² Vasari, 3: 7.

³ See, for instance, Fagiolo dell'Arco, p. 98 or Freedberg, *Parmigianino*, p. 97.

⁴ For instance, in Fontanellato Parmigianino repeated some of Correggio's spatial themes from Correggio's Camera della Badessa. Fagiolo dell'Arco, p. 97.

⁵ Interestingly, they are all displayed together at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna—undoubtedly because of their similarity in style, format, and subject.

Because all of these paintings bear similar dates, Parmigianino likely knew and was influenced by Correggio's precedent. This example demonstrates how Correggio was not only a stylistic influence but also a model for Parmigianino's use of eroticism.

Parmigianino worked in Rome in the period before the Sack. There he would likely have been in contact with Rosso Fiorentino and Giulio Romano, two artists whose work often involved eroticism. Although Parmigianino's paintings seem stylistically uninformed by these two artists, they, too, could have provided models for erotic subjects. The sensuous form of Rosso's *Dead Christ Supported by Angels* (Fig. 4) was provocative if not overtly erotic. And, as mentioned in Chapter I, Rosso's *Moses Defending the Daughters of Jethro* of c. 1523 (Fig. 3) was full of sensuous renderings of exposed flesh and writhing bodies. Moses resorted to violence to defend the virtue of the daughters of Jethro (a virtue perhaps somewhat spoiled by their disheveled semi-nudity). It was one more example of the mixture of violence and love so common in Renaissance art.

Giulio Romano was an example of the Renaissance erotic artist *par excellence*. After he left Rome to work for the Duke of Mantua, he created works such as the *Jupiter and Olympia* (Fig. 37) on a wall of the Palazzo del Tè. This ithyphallic king of the gods is about to penetrate his lover, an obviously erotic image. Giulio's most famous (or infamous) erotic work was his series of drawings of positions for sexual intercourse, called *I modi*. By 1524 he had commissioned Marcantonio Raimondi to make prints of them. The poet and writer Aretino was subsequently inspired to write explicit poems to accompany each position, and thus the *Sonnetti lussuriosi* were born. Although these prints with poems were destined for private circulation, some copies were seen on the open market. Pope Clement VII was shocked and demanded the arrest of Giulio and Raimondi. Aretino intervened on behalf of his friends, but the Pope soon discovered that it was none other than Aretino himself who had written the accompanying poems. Horrified, he ordered all three arrested. Giulio and Aretino escaped to Mantua, but Raimondi was thrown into prison until influential friends could arrange his release.⁶ Although none of the original editions of the *Modi* remains, a page from a copy (Fig. 38) shows the explicit nature of the illustrations. Parmigianino was in Rome while this scandal was unfolding. Certainly this episode showed him that a market was available for erotic works, as well as suggesting to him that his more explicit eroticism might better be kept to himself, in his private drawings.

Even the "divine" Raphael was capable of painting erotic subjects. Cardinal Bernardo Bibbiena, Leo X's secretary, lived in the Vatican (where he spent part of his time writing somewhat risqué plays). In 1515 Raphael (or, more specifically, assistants under Raphael's supervision) redecorated the secretary's fire-damaged bathroom. The theme was the history of Venus, including the Castration of Uranus, another scene of sexual violence. Since that time, the room has been changed and the frescoes whitewashed.⁷ Freedberg surmised that after Parmigianino spent time in Rome, Raphael's influence replaced that of Correggio's.⁸ Thus, Raphael would have provided one more precedent for Parmigianino.

⁶ Richard Lewinsohn, *A History of Sexual Customs*, trans. Alexander Mayce (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), pp. 156-57.

⁷ Webb, p. 115.

⁸ Freedberg, *Parmigianino*, p. 63.

The influence of Michelangelo on other artists of the period, although perhaps sometimes overstated, must be considered. I have mentioned the sensuality of his *Dying Slave* (Fig. 2) and *Risen Christ* (Fig. 3). While robust energy of Michelangelo's work seems rather removed from Parmigianino's rarefied delicacy, the two do share a fundamental interest in the sensual and sensuous potential of the human figure. Michelangelo's own drawings often included explicitly erotic work. A drawing of a *Dreamer* included two couples engaged in sexual activity; an oversized phallus gripped by a hand, and another, free-floating phallus. The penises have been erased and are barely visible, but are evident in early engravings made after the drawing.⁹

Seemingly, erotic depictions were not at all uncommon in the early sixteenth century. But is this work erotic only to our twentieth-century eyes? The answer is no. By mid-century, when the Counter-Reformation had tightened its grip, the use of erotic imagery in art had become so widespread that the Council of Trent felt compelled to condemn and to forbid it. "All lasciviousness must be avoided, so that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty inciting to lust."¹⁰ Restrictions were placed on nudity as well. However, the dichotomy of Renaissance society is again evident, since many patrons of the council were not particularly well qualified to pass judgment and make restrictions on nudity in art. For example, Charles V collected Titian's nudes voraciously, as did his son Philip II.¹¹

Lili Fröhlich-Bum suggested one further artistic influence. She saw Parmigianino's work as quite separate from the art of Correggio and Michelangelo, since Parmigianino had no desire for realism, but for an ideal form. She found the influence of northern artists important, and, significantly, traced his tendency toward line and elongation directly to the antique art of Praxiteles and Leochares rather than to the Florentine Renaissance.¹² We have seen that Parmigianino often drew antique statuary, as did many other artists. The many antique statues he could have seen in Rome and elsewhere must have inspired him, and their popularity and appeal were widespread at the time.¹³ The sensual treatment of antique figures and of their nudity certainly may have been a source for his erotic interests, as well as for his style.

Were these artists and their works the ultimate source of the eroticism of Parmigianino, or were all of these artists and their art merely symptomatic of some other cultural force? In fact, the culture of the time was, by today's standards, a rather seamy and sordid array of prostitutes and courtesans, lecherous nobles and clergy, and sophisticated aristocrats who enjoyed titillating pornography. One need only examine the history and literature of the time to find confirmation for such a picture of the society.

Andre Chastel eloquently summed up the nature of sixteenth-century culture:

⁹ Robert S. Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of his Life and Images* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 309-10. I have not illustrated this work because in its damaged state, and seen in reproductions, one simply cannot discern much of the imagery.

¹⁰ Rudolf and Margaret Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), p. 177.

¹¹ Lewinsohn, p. 184.

¹² Fröhlich-Bum, pp. 4-5.

¹³ See Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981; reprint ed., 1982).

The sixteenth century was far from chaste. It tended towards the extravagantly Epicurean in Ronsard and the *livrets de folastrie*, in Aretino's pornography, in licentious plays of every kind and the gross ribaldries of Rabelais. Much the same was true of painting, as may be seen conspicuously in the case of Giulio Romano and Marcantonio. Most products of the sixteenth century were marked by a frank zest for living, which lent them an air of straightforward robustness, devoid of shame or embarrassment.¹⁴

Georgina Masson held a similar opinion:

Renaissance Italy was in fact a remarkably free and easy place—it was only later, when Spain held Lombardy and all the south, that pomp and protocol reigned in the peninsula.¹⁵

The Italian Renaissance, then, was not the idealistic society envisioned by Jakob Burckhardt. On the contrary, it was undoubtedly in the nature of this society to encourage the creation of Parmigianino's erotic art and to foster his own personal erotic interests. Evidence of this attraction to sexual matters abounded in the writings of Parmigianino's contemporaries and near-contemporaries, both historical and literary.

Arno Karlen described the Renaissance as “less a revolution than an unstable point in a long continuum of change between the Dark Ages and the later eighteenth century, full of hesitations, backslidings, and anticipations of the future.”¹⁶ Although this statement implied that civilization “advances,” Karlen was essentially correct in depicting the Renaissance as wobbling between the irrationality of the Middle Ages and the supreme rationality of the Age of Reason. He aptly characterized the period when he wrote, “Coarseness and refinement existed side by side in society and within individual men.”¹⁷ This dichotomy was a hallmark of the Renaissance.

In the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini, several incidents gave clues to the nature of Renaissance man. Cellini typically travelled among Italy's cultured elite. Yet he was accused of murder, and his autobiography is full of sordid incidents. When his rival Baccio Bandinelli called Cellini a dirty sodomite, Cellini's reply was:

Yet would to God that I understood so noble an art as you allude to; they say that Jove used it with Ganymede in Paradise, and here upon this earth it is practised by some of the greatest emperors and kings.¹⁸

Cellini here used a humanist defense for what was condemned as a vice: sodomy. Despite what seems to be its widespread practice, homosexuality and sodomy nevertheless remained a “ghastly breach” of the social order.¹⁹ The fact that it was so considered is shown by Bandinelli's use of the accusation of sodomy as an insult. Cellini, however, chose to receive it as a compliment by citing precedents and making it seem to be the vice of kings. His reference to Jupiter and Ganymede was a humanistic use of classical mythology. Cellini seems to have confirmed Ludovico Ariosto's

¹⁴ Andre Chastel, *The Crisis of the Renaissance, 1520-1600*, trans. Peter Price (Geneva: Editions Albert Skira, 1968), p. 155.

¹⁵ Georgina Masson, *Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), p. 40.

¹⁶ Arno Karlen, *Sexuality and Homosexuality: A New View* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1971), p. 104.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Benvenuto Cellini, *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, trans. John Addington Symonds (Garden City, NY: International Collections Library, 1946), pp. 352-53.

¹⁹ Karlen, p. 120.

opinion (in his *Satires*) that “few humanists are free” of the vice of sodomy.²⁰ Laxness in enforcement of laws against homosexuality derived:

. . . partly from a general apathy towards transgressions in a world used to crime, violence, and excesses of every description, and partly from the tolerance of the humanist-inspired educated classes, for whom homosexual love had the sanction of the Greek philosophers.²¹

In another celebrated incident, Cellini disguised a neighbor boy as a woman and escorted him to a party. After the young man, named Diego, captured everyone’s hearts, he was declared the winner of an informal beauty contest. Cellini then revealed him to be a male, to the uproarious amusement of all present.²² The gender confusion, androgyny, and hermaphroditism that were so prevalent in Parmigianino’s art seem to have had a cultural parallel. People were not shocked by such displays of cross-dressing; they were amused.

In June of 1514 a “hunt” in the Piazza de’ Signori in Florence included a massing of various large animals, exotic and common. According to Landucci, someone put a mare and a stallion together “so that everyone could see them copulate.” Although Landucci expressed indignation, Cambi, another author, wrote that “this feast was the most marvellous entertainment for girls to behold.” Pope Alexander VI and his daughter Lucrezia Borgia watched a similar entertainment from the Vatican palace.²³ Here is another parallel with the eroticism of Parmigianino. The artist’s use of the erotic potential of animals must have amused contemporary viewers much as the display of the copulating horses was enjoyed.

The idea of a pope and his daughter in the Vatican together seems strange today. Not only is the legitimacy of the offspring called into question, but the Pope’s infraction of his vow of celibacy is also made obvious. In the Renaissance, however, illegitimate children were common, and people often did not trouble themselves over a child’s legitimacy. Aretino, Giorgione, and Leonardo were all bastards, but suffered little social stigma because of it.²⁴

One of the most telling aspects of Renaissance culture was the role of the courtesan. In 1490, the prostitute population in Rome was estimated to be about 7,000. They commonly escorted priests about town. According to the historian Sanudo, in Venice 11,654 prostitutes inhabited a city with a population of only 300,000.²⁵ The presence of so many of these professionals bore witness to the free exercise of sexual desires at the time.

Even more interesting are some of the anecdotes involving courtesans. The courtesan occupied a distinctly paradoxical role, thus reflecting the cultural dichotomy. She was simultaneously a lady and a whore, a cultured woman with whom many men fell madly in love and a professional prostitute who had to save her money and protect herself for days when her beauty would fade. In Rome, the heyday of the courtesan was from the end of the fifteenth century until the Sack in 1527²⁶—not coincidentally, inclusive of the years Parmigianino was in Rome. Courtesans continued to be

²⁰ James Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 32.

²¹ Wittkower, p. 170.

²² Cellini, pp. 52-55.

²³ Wittkower, p. 168.

²⁴ Lewinsohn, p. 164.

²⁵ Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History* (New York: Stein & Day, 1980), pp. 279-80.

²⁶ Masson, p. 10.

one of Rome's great attractions until mid-century, when the reforming Pope Paul IV's ascension to the seat of St. Peter brought about a change in the city's moral climate.²⁷ For example, during the long Church conclave after the death of Leo X in 1521, the courtesan Matrema non vole (mother doesn't want me to) put a notice up in Rome's commercial center. She announced that she would sleep with any man who would bet 100 ducats against her choice for Pope. If she lost, she would spend three nights at no charge with the man who took the bet.²⁸

According to the diary of Johann Burchard, a German secretary in the Vatican, in 1501 fifty courtesans attended a supper in Cesare Borgia's apartment in the Apostolic Palace. After supper they danced with servants and party-goers, first clothed and then in the nude. They then played a game in which the nude women picked up chestnuts off the floor. Finally, prizes were offered to the man who copulated with the most prostitutes. This entire event took place in the "public hall," possibly the Sala Regia.²⁹ Earlier, in 1498, Burchard had recorded the arrest of Barbara of Spain, a black servant of the courtesan Corsetta. "Barbara" was actually a male transvestite who walked about in women's clothing, often that of Corsetta.³⁰ In fact, cross-dressing was common for courtesans, who often wore men's clothes in order to avoid being recognized.³¹ This custom further supports the notion of the sixteenth century as a period in which gender ambiguity was common and accepted.

Courtesans often inspired poetry from their lovers, among whom were some of the more famous poets of the time. The poet Lasca wrote a poem in praise of the courtesan Nannina "in which he described her most intimate bodily attractions with the extraordinary candor typical of the time."³² Girolamo Muzio, a poet in the court of Ferrara in the 1530s, was devoted to the courtesan Tullia d'Aragona and wrote of her in the "Tirrenia" eclogues.

Come beautiful nymph, and gather into your soft arms he who with open arms awaits you with desire, and welcome in your womb, with joy, your ardent lover: Hold close your yearning lover and press your lips to his. Suck the live spirit from the soul of the beloved one: And with your spirit inspire the living flower of his desires.³³

This excerpt reveals the explicit nature of some sixteenth-century literature. Muzio's plea to "welcome in your womb . . . your ardent lover" seems fairly explicit. The metaphor "Suck the live spirit from the soul . . ." could also be interpreted sexually.

When angry, such writers could vent their wrath poetically in equally explicit terms. Beccuti (Il Coppetta), after parting ways with the courtesan Angela Greca, wrote of her, "She acts the young lady, and has convinced herself that she pees orange flower water and shits gold." By 1524, this very

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 75-76.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹ Ibid., p. 31.

³² Ibid., p. 116.

³³ As quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 105-06. The original Italian reads: "Vien, Ninfa bella, a fra le molle braccia / Raccogli quel che, con braccia aperte / Disioso l'aspetta, e nel tuo grembo / Ricevi, lieta l'infocato amante: / Stringi'l bramoso amante; e stretta aggiungi / La labbra a le sue labbra: e'l vivo spirto / Suggi de l'alma amato: e del tuo spirto / Il vivo fiore inspira le sue brame . . ." Translation Georgina Masson.

courtesan was one of the most popular in Rome.³⁴ We may consider Beccuti to have been an educated, cultured man, but he certainly did not think it beneath him to resort to vulgar obscenities.

In fact, literature yields some of the best examples of eroticism in the sixteenth century.

Discussions of sex were common,³⁵ and as Masson described it:

One of the most surprising things . . . is their [the inhabitants of sixteenth-century Italy] delight in interminable discussions about love in the abstract, when so much of their time was spent in uninhibited enjoyment of love in its most down-to-earth physical form.³⁶

One popular story was “The Tale of the Youth Who Was Caught in the Act of Adultery and Was Sodomized and Flogged by the Husband,” written about 1520 by Gerolamo Morlino, a Neapolitan jurist.³⁷ As a jurist, Morlino would not have represented the lower classes. On the contrary, his social class would have been that of the educated aristocrats who enjoyed titillating pornography and racy stories just as much as did less sophisticated individuals. The interest in the erotic was present at all levels of society.

Pietro Aretino exemplified the nature and position of the sixteenth-century aristocrat. The sometimes scurrilous poet was in great demand in Italian courts for his quick wit, native intelligence, and educated intellect. In writing as well as in conversation, Aretino could turn from a serious discussion of philosophy to a pornographic dirty joke. I have already discussed his role in the creation of *I modi* and his accompanying *Sonnetti lussuriosi*. A brief quote illustrates their explicit nature.

As I can now feel such an impressive tool
That’s opening up the edges of my quim
I wish that I was nothing but quim
And that you were all tool.³⁸

Some people (the Pope, for one) found these verses shocking and offensive. Aretino, however, eloquently defended his pornography with all of the literary powers at his disposal. In a letter defending the *Sonnetti*, he explains his rationale, expounding upon a sentiment perhaps widely held at the time.

As both in ancient and modern times poets and sculptors have found diversion of the spirit in writing or fashioning lewd works—witness, for example, that marble satyr attempting a boy, displayed in the Palazzo Chigi—so did I compose to those *Modi* sonnets of voluptuous memory, as they are to be read under the engravings and as I dedicate them to you, defying all hypocrites. The devil take that miserable opinion and so-called propriety which forbids our eyes to see precisely that which gives them most pleasure! What is the harm if we see how a man mounts a woman? Shall animals enjoy more freedom than men? My opinion is that we ought to carry representations of that instrument which Mother Nature has given us for our self-preservation, hung around our necks and clasped in our caps.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid., p. 85. The original reads “E far la donzellata, e persuadersi / Di pisciar acqua nanfa, e far de l'oro.” Translation Georgina Masson.

³⁵ Tannahill, p. 283.

³⁶ Masson, p. 121.

³⁷ Saslow, p. 82.

³⁸ Patrick J. Kearney, *A History of Erotic Literature* (London: MacMillan London, Ltd., 1982; reprint ed., New York: Bookthrift, 1982), p. 28.

³⁹ Lewinsohn, p. 159. Thomas Caldecott Chubb, *The Divine Aretino* (New York: Stein and Day, Publishers, 1965), p. 71, indicated that this letter was for Battista Zatti, a physician.

Possibly Aretino's most famous work, *I Ragionamenti*, first published in Venice in 1534 and 1536, has been described as "two sets of three dialogues between an older woman and a younger, more inexperienced one in which the lives of women in various occupations or roles are explained in a realistic and satirical, but not obscene, manner."⁴⁰ The author of this statement, Patrick Kearney, must have read an expurgated version, for the *Ragionamenti* included (in the "First Day") an account of an orgy of nuns and monks, including explicit descriptions of masturbation and sodomy, while the rest of the work proceeded in kind.⁴¹ A play, *Il Marescalco*, discussed the sex lives of cardinals and their mistresses, and included accounts of cuckolds and transvestites.⁴² In fact, it included a character modeled on a famous homosexual of the Mantuan court. In the story, the man believed he will be forced to marry and was surprised and delighted when he discovered that his bride was a boy.⁴³

Aretino was "as well known for his whoring, numerous mistresses and unabated lust as for his verse."⁴⁴ In a letter to Sebastiano del Piombo, Aretino wrote:

I do not deny that there are Platonic steers who in their decrepitude scarce can afford the luxury of one small volley a year, but if I did not draw a bow at this handmaiden or that at least forty times a month, I would hold myself to be all washed out.⁴⁵

While Aretino may well have exaggerated his sexual prowess, what is important is the emphasis on the free expression of sexual desire. Aretino showed the cultural acceptance of the symbolism of the androgyne in a letter in which he praised Sebastiano del Piombo's *Venus*. In it, he stressed the figure's androgynous combination of the body of a woman and the muscles of a man and how this showed Venus was "stirred by both masculine and feminine feeling."⁴⁶ In his writings Aretino touched on all of the same kinds of eroticism as Parmigianino did in his art: androgyny and transvestitism, homosexuality, explicit depictions of sexual activity, and so forth. This was, in fact the man who commissioned the *Madonna della Rosa*. Aretino and Parmigianino likely travelled in similar social circles. Logically, in the context of their similar use of eroticism in their creative work, Parmigianino must have had a similarly relaxed attitude towards human sexuality.

One might argue that, on the basis of Aretino's famous letter criticizing Michelangelo's Sistine *Last Judgment* as licentious, the poet was sometimes subject to the same sort of prudery as that exhibited by the Pope who ordered Giulio Romano arrested because of *I modi*. However, Mark Roskill has argued that this letter is problematic and casts doubts on its authorship.⁴⁷ Indeed, it seems unlikely that the author of the *Ragionamenti* would accuse Michelangelo of indecently exposing certain parts of the body "without regard . . . for the sanctity of the person depicted . . ."⁴⁸

Other writers of the Renaissance also tried their hand at erotica. Authors such as Valla and Beccatelli imitated Juvenal and other Roman poets, writing sexual adventures including oral and anal

⁴⁰ Kearney, p. 24.

⁴¹ James Cleugh, *The Divine Aretino* (New York: Stein and Day, Publishers, 1965), pp. 207-09.

⁴² Karlen, p. 108.

⁴³ Cleugh, p. 140.

⁴⁴ Karlen, p. 108.

⁴⁵ Saslow, p. 71.

⁴⁶ Saslow, p. 78.

⁴⁷ Roskill, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

sex (both heterosexual and homosexual), orgies, bestiality, and flagellation. The quintessential humanist, Pico della Mirandola, described in his writings a man who enjoyed being beaten bloody by a whip dipped in vinegar. Pico thereby wins the dubious title of the first modern chronicler of sado-masochism.⁴⁹ Short stories about seduction, adultery, perversion, “lecherous monks and insatiable ladies,” known as *novelle*, were all the rage. Accounts of lesbianism were common.⁵⁰

We must not think that these writers were social outcasts. Aretino was a welcome and honored visitor in Italian courts. The audience for the writings of these authors of erotica was in these same courts. The proliferation of explicit eroticism in literature was only natural in a society that involved itself so much with sexual matters.

This brief description of a relatively unexamined side of Renaissance culture supports the view of the society as a dichotomy. While the Renaissance aristocrat was studying Plato, Petrarch, and St. Augustine, he was simultaneously supporting a thriving sex industry (the courtesans and erotic literature). He seems to have been able to present an elegiac discussion of polite manners and make his point by use of the tawdriest kind of dirty joke. I suspect that he wanted to experience all of life, from the loftiest intellectual philosophy to the most base carnal desires. Rudolf and Margot Wittkower have noted the duality of love in the Renaissance. This duality was rooted in the Middle Ages, and is “evident in the antithesis between the new concept of love which spread with the Platonic revival of the Italian Renaissance and in the elegant obscenities published by the erudite humanist writers.”⁵¹ In fact, Neo-Platonic ideas about love seem not to have hindered its physical expression at all. “Neo-Platonic gallantry eventually became as much a veneer for cynical sexuality as Plato’s theories had for ordinary buggery.”⁵²

Other contemporaneous ideas may have influenced Parmigianino’s use of androgynes. “In practice, during this period the distinction between bisexual and homosexual, like that between hermaphrodite and homosexual, seems not to have been rigidly drawn.”⁵³ All sorts of cross-dressing and gender confusion took place. I have already mentioned the story of Barbara, the transvestite servant of a courtesan, and Aretino’s appreciation of the androgyny of Sebastiano’s *Venus*. Another example of transvestitism was that of Lorenzaccio and Alessandro de’ Medici, who in the 1530s often went about town disguised as women.⁵⁴

Renaissance thinkers had some unusual ideas about the relationship of beauty to androgyny. Like so much about the culture, this relationship included some contradictory elements. Elizabeth Cropper has explained how a preference for the delicate and sweet beauty of women was dominant in aristocratic circles in the 1520s and 1530s, and was also admired in men.⁵⁵ The Renaissance writer Dolce explains that delicacy was not limited to women. In “men of class,” delicacy of figure predominated, without being excessive.⁵⁶ Saslow traced ambiguity of gender to classical antiquity, to

⁴⁹ Karlen, p. 107.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 106, 23.

⁵¹ Wittkower, p. 166.

⁵² Karlen, p. 106.

⁵³ Saslow, p. 79.

⁵⁴ Christopher Hibbert, *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1980), p. 255.

⁵⁵ Cropper, p. 376.

⁵⁶ Roskill, p. 143.

a tradition that saw the androgyne and hermaphrodite as “a distinctive ideal of beauty,” and that associated this androgyny with “effeminacy, bisexuality, and homosexuality.”⁵⁷

Confirmation of the recognition of this tradition is found in the guidebook for the well-mannered Renaissance aristocrat, Baldesar Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*. Originally published in 1528, and thus contemporary with Parmigianino, Castiglione’s book contributes to our understanding of this androgynous ideal.

And hence male and female are by nature always together, nor can the one be without the other And as one sex alone shows imperfection, ancient theologians attribute both sexes to God: hence, Orpheus said that Jove was male and female; and we read in Holy Writ poets, in speaking of the gods, often confuse the sex.⁵⁸

The tradition, present in both Neo-Platonic and alchemical thought, of the androgynous nature of the origin of the race was common knowledge. Castiglione, however, did not relish effeminate beauty, at least for men.

I would have our courtier’s face be such, not so soft and feminine as many attempt to have who not only curl their hair and pluck their eyebrows, but preen themselves in all those ways that the most wanton and dissolute women in the world adopt These, since nature did not make them women as they clearly wish to appear and be, should be treated not as good women, but as public harlots, and driven . . . from the society of all noble men.⁵⁹

Castiglione disliked men who made themselves up like women, separating himself from those who admired androgynous beauty. However, his very mention of “so many” who were adopting this androgynous “look” shows how the taste for it had penetrated the society. In fact, Castiglione may well be in a minority in his distaste for delicacy in men.⁶⁰ Parmigianino’s androgynes may have been (in addition to their alchemical significance) reflections of contemporary ideals of androgynous beauty. Yet his work is also filled with highly masculine, muscular figures also. Parmigianino, too, mirrored the dichotomy, the duality, of Renaissance society.

How did Renaissance Italians reconcile their paradoxical beliefs? How could they simultaneously believe in the ideals of Neo-Platonic love and practice debauchery? Part of the answer lies in the ancient philosophies revived by the Renaissance humanists. One of these was Skepticism. Skepticism became increasingly popular in the sixteenth century for its claim “that by abandoning all rigid doctrines and opinions, we free ourselves from unnecessary worries and are left to face only the unavoidable necessities of life.”⁶¹ With this happy rationalization, Renaissance society was free to go about its business without giving consistency a second thought. Another revived philosophy, that of Epicurus, “proposed intellectual pleasure as the chief end of human life” and was well-known and widely discussed in the Renaissance.⁶² Intellectual pleasure was among the aims of the Mannerist artist, as well as of his viewers, and perhaps many people were able to convert the call for intellectual pleasure into permission to pursue other kinds of pleasure. With the

⁵⁷ Saslow, p. 63.

⁵⁸ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), p. 216.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶⁰ Wittkower, p. 168, explained that “Castiglione’s chivalrous ideas percolated down to only a chosen few.” I suspect that his ideals of masculinity were among these ideas.

⁶¹ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 36.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Skeptical reassurance as to the unimportance of being overly concerned with “rigid doctrines,” many must have felt perfectly comfortable in seeking Epicurean goals in all aspects of their lives.

At this point we can begin to see how eroticism’s cultural manifestations relate to its artistic manifestations and to the phenomenon of Mannerism. This brief treatise on the seamier side of sixteenth-century Italy attempts to draw a more accurate picture of the environment in which Parmigianino worked. This world seems, in its relationship to matters sexual, to resemble our twentieth-century world. We live in a society that, on the surface, has a highly moralized approach towards sex. Our sexual morés derive from the restrictive Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet coexisting with this lofty refinement, the reality of the culture is that sex and eroticism play a role much like that in sixteenth-century Italy. Even people who might never talk publicly of sex or pornography, or who even condemn it, may enjoy it in private. Sexually suggestive and explicit material not only survives, it flourishes, in advertising, literature, and the media (as well as in art). Pornography is big business, and it is freely available despite the efforts of some to restrict or ban it. Likewise, despite official church sanctions against the free expression of sexuality in Renaissance Italy, no one felt compelled to let that obstruct their enjoyment of physical pleasures. The cases listed above serve as evidence of this fact.

But how does this relate to Mannerism? John Shearman demonstrated that Mannerism was the style of the age, not just of the arts.⁶³ Freedberg explained that literature encouraged Mannerism in the visual arts. The intellectual nature of Mannerism in the visual arts was naturally sympathetic to literature. Literature’s use of symbol, metaphor, and allegory was echoed in the visual arts, with the blessings of patrons and critics. The “disjunctive strands of meaning” in Mannerist art came together to form a whole much as in contemporaneous polyphonic music.⁶⁴ As explained in Chapter I, Mannerism was an intellectual style, which sought to refine and to complicate. It was intended to be artificial and to work on many levels simultaneously.

The idea of an art that operates on many levels is eminently appropriate with the work of Parmigianino. As we have seen, the androgynes possessed a multiplicity of meanings. As a Mannerist artist, Parmigianino would have delighted in such complicated and artificial allusions as he found in the multivalent image of the androgyne. He also would not have overlooked an opportunity to complicate his paintings further by additions of eroticism. Erotic content could be refined (by means of his coolly intellectual esthetic) into another sign of the sophistication of his art. The art itself was destined for an equally sophisticated audience.

The exaggerated and artificial sexual practices of the time were just as Mannerist as any other aspect. Eroticism became, to some extent, as sophisticatedly intellectualized as all other parts of the culture. The result, in works such as Bronzino’s *Allegory* (Fig. 5) was a chilled, esthetically refined, artificial, Mannerist eroticism. The distinctive strain of eroticism that runs through Parmigianino’s work was not only a reflection of relaxed attitudes towards sexuality; it was also a further attempt to complicate and refine his work by adding another layer of meaning to be appreciated and interpreted.

With such an interpretation the variety of Mannerist expression, not only in Parmigianino, but also in other artists, becomes consistent. The Mannerist artist was interested in creating a work

⁶³ All of Shearman’s *Mannerism* is a proof of this fact.

⁶⁴ Freedberg, “Observations,” pp. 192, 194.

that was as much an intellectual masterpiece and a riddle as it was a *tour-de-force* of visual refinement. As Vasari, the quintessential Mannerist, explained in his guide to painters, “For when the intellect puts forth refined and judicious conceptions, the hand which has practised design for many years, exhibits the perfection and excellence of the arts as well as the knowledge of the artist.”⁶⁵ In the case of Parmigianino, as well as many other artists, that knowledge included eroticism.

⁶⁵ Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, trans. Louisa S. Maclehorse, ed. with an introduction by G. Baldwin Brown (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1960), p. 206.

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