

Giulio Romano's *Lovers*: A Reflection on its Visual Sources and Literary Associations

Michiaki KOSHIKAWA

In the *Life of Giulio Romano*, Giorgio Vasari described the large erotic painting now in the Hermitage Museum, *The Lovers* (fig. 1),¹⁾ as follows: "a youth and a girl embracing in bed and caressing each other, while an old woman behind a door is peeping at them. These figures are slightly less than natural size and very graceful."²⁾ Vasari saw this rather lascivious work at an uncertain date in the house of Vespasiano Gonzaga, and stated explicitly that it had been presented by Duke Federico Gonzaga of Mantua to Vespasiano together with a small *Nativity*, also by Giulio's hand. At the death of Duke Federico in 1540, Vespasiano, the future Duke of Sabbioneta, was only about nine years old. Perhaps, the two paintings were a part of the legacy of Duke Federico to Vespasiano who would later become a noted collector of works of art.

Despite the total lack of documentary evidence, there is a general consensus, on a stylistic basis, in dating the *Lovers* to around 1524, immediately after Giulio's arrival in Mantua.³⁾ We know nothing about the original setting for this panel, but its large, horizontal format (163 x 337 centimeters) seems to suggest that it was designed to be set on a specific wall above a princely couch. In fact, we find a comparable case in Botticelli's *Primavera* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) which has a very similar width (314 centimeters). The 1499 inventory of the Florentine palace of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici published by John Shearman unequivocally showed that the Botticelli panel was hung above a "letucio" of the exact same width, which was most probably a part of the original arrangement of the room.⁴⁾ The thematic choice of the Hermitage painting internally supports the supposition of a similar location, and, in any case, this rather licentious image must have been reserved for a most private quarter of Duke Federico's residence.

Unlike his mention of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Vasari's description of the Hermitage *Lovers* avoids applying any names of mythological characters to the depicted couple.⁵⁾ This is understandable, since with all its highly idealized mode of representation, any specific attribute is lacking in

these lovers, and the intrusion of the procuress-like old woman to the right of the composition sharply conflicts with pictorial conventions of an elevated world of mythology. On the other hand, scholars have attempted in the past to give these lovers some specific names of mythological or historical characters: "Mars and Venus," or "Alexander and Roxana."⁶⁾ As is shown in the present-day title given to the picture, these denominations failed to convince modern scholarship, while we still are somewhat hesitant to consider the scene as being no more than an erotic genre representation.⁷⁾ This situation itself is typical of the recent discussions of the erotic imagery of the Renaissance, with quite contrasting interpretative attempts which are summarized as, to quote Mary Pardo's terms, "allegorist" and "literalist" attitudes.⁸⁾ In short, we might be endlessly puzzled about, as two poles apart, whether the beautiful female nude reclining on the bed is Venus or a courtesan, and whether the depicted setting is the goddess's regal bedroom or an ennobled brothel.

How should we confront this interpretative conundrum in the case of the Hermitage *Lovers*? If we are not given any clue to decide which of the two alternative interpretations is "correct," one possible solution is obviously to regard the woman as at once Venus and a courtesan/mistress, leaving the possibility of multiple readings open according to the beholders' modes of perception. Giulio Romano was no naive artist regarding thematic inventions, and the ambiguity may well have been quite deliberate. As Sylvia Ferino Pagden has aptly noted, a remarkable feature of the *Lovers* lies in its playful effect of surprise, with its contrasting veins of the elevated and the lower, the noble and the vulgar, the serious and the burlesque.⁹⁾ The idealized beauty of the lovers is only emphasized so that the beholder may be amused by these very contrasts. This kind of comment might sound rather arbitrary, but, as we will see below, visual traditions and literary contexts related to this image provide ample justification for such a modality of reception. In this essay, I will attempt to reconstruct, or at least sketch out, a part of the imaginative framework for Giulio's bedroom scene, discussing its lineage in figurative traditions and the rich literary associations surrounding this image.

First, let us note a quite apparent feature of Giulio's interior scene: the majority of its composition is solely occupied by a gorgeous bed. I think this compositional



fig.1 Giulio Romano, *The Lovers*, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

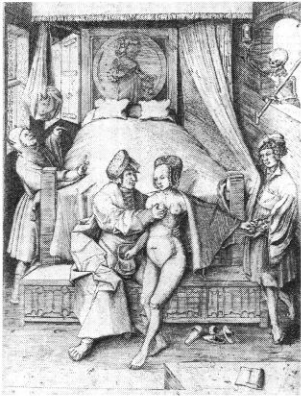


fig.2 Monogrammist L, *The Interior with ill-suited lovers, a fool and Death*, engraving



fig.3 Israhel van Meckenem, *The Couple Seated on the Bed*, engraving



fig.4 Israhel van Meckenem, *The Organ Player*, engraving

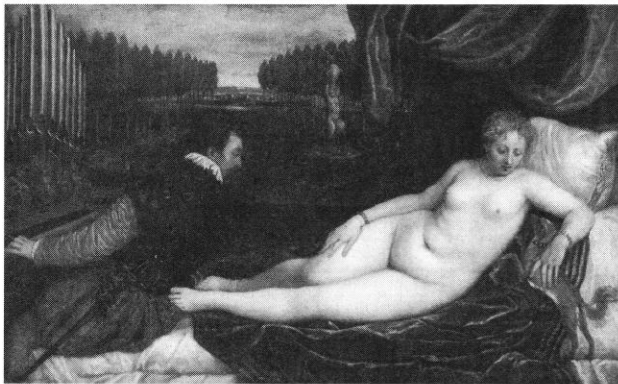


fig.5 Titian, *Venus with an Organ Player*, Museo del Prado, Madrid

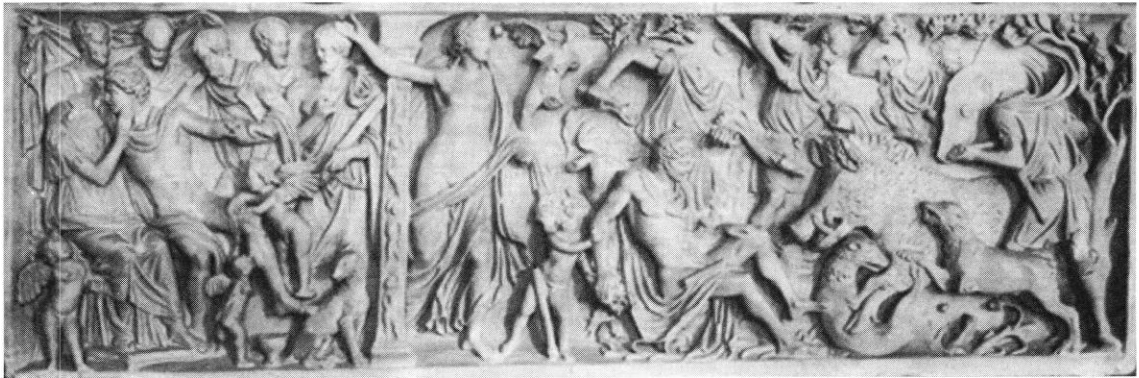


fig.7 Adonis and Venus sarcophagus, Roman, 2nd century A.D., Palazzo Ducale, Mantua



fig.6 Enea Vico (after Parmigianino), *Venus and Mars Embracing as Vulcan Works at his Forge*, engraving



fig.8 Giulio Romano, *Apollo and Cyparissus (?) embracing*, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

idea ultimately traces back to the northern tradition of genre-allegorical representation of "lovers on the bed." For example, a comparison with the Monogrammist L's small print representing the *Interior with ill-suited lovers, a fool and Death* (fig. 2)¹⁰ reveals, with all its totally different style, medium and dimensions, a close parallel with Giulio's pictorial ideas: the large bed with an erotic couple, someone watching secretly from outside, and the motif of slippers alluding to domesticity and intimacy. Above all, a sort of satirical mood, common to both of the images, arises from the same dual structure of the narrative: the psychological projection of the beholder's self may fall upon the male lover absorbed in erotic act, and at the same time, upon the sarcastic "Peeping Tom" of the love affairs. Further, the ring of keys hanging from the old

woman's waist in Giulio's picture is quite comparable with the same motif in Israhel van Meckenem's *Couple Seated on the Bed* (fig. 3), where the motif's sexual meaning is rendered more apparent by being positioned at the woman's lap.¹¹

Incidentally, a similar conceptual parallelism may be observed between Israhel van Meckenem's *Organ Player* (fig. 4) and Titian's versions of *Venus with an Organ Player* (fig. 5), suggesting that the great master of female beauty knew such print images of erotic allegory.¹² Also, the northern inspiration for bedroom scenes of the High Renaissance is indicated by the typically northern motif of window appearing in *Venus and Mars Embracing as Vulcan Works at his Forge*, engraved by Enea Vico after Parmigianino's design (fig. 6),¹³ which obviously belongs