The Edgar Wind Journal

Volume 7

7/2024

ISSN 2785-2903

www.edgarwindjournal.eu

The Edgar Wind Journal

ISSN 2785-2903

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Death in the Garden of Venus:

Remarks about Botticelli's Mythological Paintings

Erminald Bertel

Abstract

The most widely accepted interpretation of Botticelli's *La Primavera* is that it was a wedding present to Semiramide Appiani and Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici. In contrast, earlier art historians believed it a metaphoric representation of Simonetta Vespucci's premature death. Both of the seemingly incompatible accounts leave some details unexplained. The present article points out these inconsistencies – for example, a conspicuous deviation from Ovid's narrative in the *Fasti*; the problem of the somewhat detached figure of Mercury, whose linkage to the rest of the scene is obscure; the partially contradictory plant symbolism and, finally, the strikingly different character of the so-called Zephyroi in *La Nascita di Venere* on the one hand and *La Primavera* on the other. Particular attention is paid to the disputed connection between the two paintings. One can construct a coherent narrative for the wedding present by reading *La Primavera* from right to left but, with partial reference to Plato's *Phaedo*, a similarly coherent interpretation by reading *La Nascita di Venere* and *La Primavera* from left to right. The possibility of a double meaning was briefly raised by Ernst Gombrich but then dismissed. Here it is argued that accepting this idea resolves the inconsistencies mentioned above, accords with Botticelli's sharp-witted genius and does justice to the intuition of early art historians, in particular Aby Warburg and Emil Jacobsen.

Keywords

Botticelli; *La Primavera*; Warburg; Plato; Double meaning

Introduction: Diverging Interpretations

Since the pre-Raphaelites 'rediscovered' Botticelli, his paintings, in particular the mythological representations of *Nascita di Venere* and of the garden of Venus, customarily called *La Primavera*, experienced an incredibly rich, but also divergent reception history.[1] According to the most widely accepted view, *La Primavera* was a present to Semiramide Appiani and Lorenzo de Pierfrancesco on the occasion of their wedding in 1482,

[1] For the manifold interpretations, see Frank Zöllner, 'Zu den Quellen und zur Ikonographie von Sandro Botticellis "Primavera"', *Wiener Jahrbuch zur Kunstgeschichte* 50, (1997), 131–158.

The Edgar Wind Journal 7: 26-42, 2024
DOI: 10.53245/EWJ-000038

presumably intended as a Spalliera decoration for the bride's room.[2] In his monograph on Botticelli, Frank Zöllner writes about *La Primavera*: 'Angesichts der inzwischen weitgehend konsolidierten Sachforschung ist Botticellis Bild heute kein Feld beliebiger hermeneutischer Optionen mehr.'[3] In other words, interpretations of the painting have to be restricted to the wedding context. This specifically rejects the arguments of earlier art historians who saw a reference to the death of Simonetta Vespucci in the picture. In the present contribution, I argue in contrast that Botticelli may have intentionally created an ambiguous iconographic programme. While the interpretation of *La Primavera* as a wedding present is almost totally convincing when the painting is read from right to left, there are a few inconsistencies which resist being seamlessly integrated into the wedding narrative. If one reverts to Aby Warburg's original idea of a synoptic reading of *Nascita* and *Primavera* from left to right, another narrative unfolds, namely, an elegy mourning the death of Simonetta Vespucci. Integrating a few observations which hitherto attracted little attention, if noted at all, one obtains an allegoric representation of Simonetta's life from her birth in Portovenere to her untimely death from consumption in Florence. Between them, these divergent interpretations account very well for almost every detail in the paintings. It is much more plausible to ascribe this fact to Botticelli's intention and inventiveness than to pure coincidence. To substantiate this claim, we start with the conventional wisdom.

1. Semiramide Appiani: War, Peace, and Wedding

La Primavera shows Venus accompanied by her followers, the three Graces and the blindfolded child Amor. The latter is about to send an arrow towards one of the Graces. On the left side, Mercury, somewhat disengaged from the rest of the scene, seems to dispel a few remnants of dark clouds with his wand. The group on the right (see Fig. 1) relates to the story of the nymph Chloris, whose name changes in Latin to Flora, as Ovid passes it down to us in the *Fasti*:

> Sic ego; sic nostris respondit diva rogatis
> dum loquitur, vernos efflat ab ore rosas.
> Chloris eram, quae Flora vocor: corrupta Latino
> nominis est nostri littera Graeca sono.
> Chloris eram, nymphe campi felicis, ubi audis
> rem fortunatis ante fuisse viris. [...]

[2] Zöllner, 'Zu den Quellen und zur Ikonographie von Sandro Botticellis "Primavera"', 132–135; Mirella Levi d'Ancona, *Botticelli's Primavera: A Botanical Interpretation Including Astrology, Alchemy, and the Medici* (Olschki-Verlag, 1983); Paul Holberton, 'Classicism and invention: Botticelli's mythologies in our time and their time', in *Botticelli Past and Present,* ed. by Ana Debenedetti und Caroline Elam (UCL Press, 2019), pp. 53–72 (64); Monica Centanni, '26 aprile, giorno di primavera: nozze fatali nel giardino di Venere. Una rivisitatione della lettura di Aby Warburg dei dipinti mitologici di Botticelli', *La Rivista di Engramma*, 105 (2013), 106–147.

[3] Frank Zöllner, *Botticelli* (Prestel-Verlag, 2009), p. 66. 'In view of the meanwhile essentially consolidated research on the matter, Botticelli's painting is today no longer a field of arbitrary hermeneutic options' (trans. by the author).

ver erat, errabam; Zephyrus conspexit, abibam;
Insequitur, fugio: fortior ille fuit, […]
vim tamen emendat dando mihi nomina nuptae,
inque meo non est ulla querella toro.
vere fruor semper: semper nitidissimus annus,
arbor habet frondes, pabula semper humus.
est mihi fecundus dotalibus hortus in agris;
aura fovet, liquidae fonte rigatur aquae.
hunc meus implevit generoso flore maritus
atque ait: „arbitrium tu, dea, floris habe."
saepe ego digestos volui numerare colores
nec potui: numero copia maior erat.
[…]
Conveniunt pictis incinctae vestibus Horae,
inque leves calathos munera nostra legunt;
protinus accedunt Charites nectuntque coronas
sertaque caelestes implicitura comas.[4]

[4] Publius Ovidius Naso, *Fasti*, 5.193–220. The following translation comes from 'Ovid: *Fasti*: Book Five', trans. by A. S. Kline, Poetry in Translation, 2004 <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidFastiBkFive.php> [accessed 18 December 2024]:

So I spoke. So the goddess responded to my question,
(While she spoke, her lips breathed out vernal roses):
'I, called Flora now, was Cloris: the first letter in Greek
Of my name, became corrupted in the Latin language.
I was Chloris, a nymph of those happy fields,
Where, as you've heard, fortunate men once lived.
[…]
It was spring, I wandered: Zephyrus saw me: I left.
He followed me: I fled: he was the stronger,
[…]
Yet he made amends for his violence, by granting me
The name of bride, and I've nothing to complain of in bed.
I enjoy perpetual spring: the season's always bright,
The trees have leaves: the ground is always green.
I've a fruitful garden in the fields that were my dower,
Fanned by the breeze, and watered by a flowing spring.
My husband stocked it with flowers, richly,
And said: "Goddess, be mistress of the flowers."
I often wished to tally the colours set there,
But I couldn't, there were too many to count.
[…]
The Hours gather dressed in colourful clothes,
And collect my gifts in slender baskets.
The Graces straight away, draw near, and twine
Wreaths and garlands to bind their heavenly hair.

Figure 1. Sandro Botticelli, Flora, Chloris and Zephyros, detail of *La Primavera*, c. 1480, tempera grassa on wood, 207 × 319 cm. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence. © Gallerie degli Uffizi.

This is the event Botticelli so impressively portrays and also seems to explain the string of flowers emerging from the mouth of the Nymph. Flora appears twice, first as Chloris being chased by Zephyros and second as the merry spring deity lavishly scattering flowers from her lap. Also, the presence of the Graces, or Charites, as they are called in Greek mythology, is mentioned in the Ovidian poem. The Horae, however, were omitted by Botticelli.

What was the conception behind such a wedding present? We need to briefly address the historical context which led to the marriage of Semiramide and Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco. The year 1478 marked the discharge of an old grudge harboured by the Florentine nobility against the Medici in the Pazzi conspiracy. By skilful financial politics and clever orchestration of Florence's republican institutions, the Medici had become the most powerful family in the city. If nothing else, the property tax introduced by Cosimo Medici, grandfather of Lorenzo il Magnifico, stirred the anger of long-established families against the Medici. When Pope Sixtus IV tried to appoint some of his protégés as bishops in the Florentine sphere of influence, Lorenzo opposed him and denied him the credit he needed to purchase the city of Imola, despite the Medici being the traditional bankers of the Vatican. Sixtus IV was furious, and the enemies of the Medici seized their chance. With the tacit consent of the Pope, they arranged a scheme to dispose of the family's leading figures. During Sunday Mass on April 26 1478, they killed Lorenzo's popular brother Giuliano. Lorenzo himself narrowly escaped, being only lightly wounded. Enormous public outrage followed, and several conspirators were lynched, among them Francesco Salviati, whom Sixtus IV had installed as the archbishop of Pisa. The pope could not tolerate this challenge to his power. Allying with Federico da Montefeltro from Urbino and King Ferdinand (Ferrante) from Naples, he declared war on Florence. The war took an unfavourable turn for Florence and threatened the existence of the urban republic. In this dangerous situation, Lorenzo volunteered to surrender himself as a hostage to King Ferrante. Using his considerable charm, he succeeded in winning over Ferrante, who quit the alliance. The landing of the Ottoman army in Otranto finally forced an end to the inner-Italian hostilities. Lorenzo decided to reinforce the peace by enacting a marriage between his cousin Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and Semiramide Appiani, who was related on her mother's side to the house of Aragon from Naples. The wedding was celebrated in 1482. Semiramide was presumably persuaded or forced into the marriage for diplomatic (and economic) reasons rather than having chosen her spouse at will.

Given this background, the iconographic programme of *Primavera* can be read from right to left as consolation and encouragement for the eighteen-year-old bride. One could imagine that the painting speaks to Semiramide in the following words: Even if this wedding ends your carefree youth forcibly, you should not quail, because your husband will honour you. You will be able to freely act in your sphere, creating and fostering life just as Flora does in this painting. Venus, deity of beauty and love, will preside over your life, and the three Charites, joy, grace, and gratitude, will keep you company. Be confident that

Amor's arrow will hit your heart. Don't be afraid, because the conciliator himself, Lorenzo il Magnifico, will be guarding you, and should dark clouds menace you, he will dispel them.

According to Mirella Levi d'Ancona, the interpretation of the painting as a wedding gift is supported by the rich botanical symbolism.[5] Strangely enough, however, a significant deviation from Ovid's narration is rarely mentioned in the literature about *Primavera*: The chain of flowers does not spring from the mouth of the happy, flower-dispensing Flora. Rather it is the fearful Chloris, trying to escape from her violent persecutor, who spews the plants from her mouth.[6] What was Botticelli's intention, when he decided to deviate on this point from the original narrative? This is not the only troublesome point. D'Ancona, who specialised in plant symbolism in Renaissance art, analysed the plants and flowers so meticulously painted by Botticelli in *Primavera*. Flora's robe is adorned with roses, carnations, and cornflowers – bridal symbols, as d'Ancona states, well suited for a painting commissioned as a wedding present. One detail, however, resists her interpretation: Flora wears, just above her forehead, a violet accompanied on both sides by ranunculus flowers (Fig. 1). 'The ranunculus usually means death. It may also have been depicted here as an attribute of spring, because it blooms in that season. If the meaning of death applies here, whose death is it?[7] Other scholars identified the flowers accompanying the violet as anemones rather than ranunculus.[8] It was Venus who made the anemone grow out of the dying Adonis' blood. The anemone flower is ephemeral because her petals are stripped off by the violent winds of spring.[9] A further botanical detail should be noted: A wonderful iris blooms below the fleeing Chloris. Previous observers explained its presence as a reference to the iris that appeared in the coat of arms of Florence. Together with the numerous references in the painting to the Medici family, the flower might seem an apt allusion to the wedding taking place in and for the common good of Florence. However, should one not expect to see the Florence coat of arms in a more central position, more ostentatious and, above all, in more vivid colours? Instead, the iris is depicted inconspicuously in sombre colours and is associated with Chloris instead of Flora. Somehow, a hint of transitoriness and death is mixed into the rendering of the Garden of Venus.

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[5] D'Ancona, *Botticelli's Primavera.*

[6] Christina Acidini notes the discrepancy implicitly by seeing in the scene a meaning which deviates even further from Ovid's narrative: 'Mit aufgeblähten Backen stößt der blauhäutige Wind einen befruchtenden Luftstrom aus [...], der in den Mund der Nymphe eindringt, wodurch augenblicklich Blumen entstehen' ['With inflated cheeks the blue-skinned wind blows out a fertilizing breeze […]. It enters the mouth of the nymph from which, immediately, flowers originate'] (trans. by the author). Christina Acidini, 'Für ein blühendes Florenz. Botticellis mythologische Allegorien', in *Botticelli: Bildnis, Mythos, Andacht*, ed. by Andreas Schumacher (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), pp. 73–98 (p. 79); Jonathan Kline details the divergences from Ovid's narrative and concludes, in contrast to the common consensus, that the source for this scene is not to be found in Ovid's *Fasti*. Jonathan Kline, 'Botticelli's Return of Persephone: On the Source and Subject of the Primavera, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 42(3) (2011), 665–688 (p. 670).

[7] D'Ancona, *Botticelli's Primavera*, p. 59.

[8] Federico Giannini and Ilaria Baratta, 'Le spezie vegetali della Primavera di Sandro Botticelli', *Finestre sull' Arte*, (2017), <https://www.finestresullarte.info/opere-e-artisti/specie-vegetali-della-primavera-di-sandro-botticelli> [accessed 13.December 2022].

[9] Alfredo Cattabiani, *Florario: Miti, leggende e simboli di fiori e piante* (Edizione Oscar Saggi, 2021), p. 165.

2. Simonetta Vespucci: Birth, Life, and Death

Death in a painting commissioned as a wedding present? Aby Warburg demonstrated in his PhD thesis[10] a close connection between the scenes displayed in *La Primavera* and the *Stanze per la Giostra* by Angelo Poliziano. In this unfinished epic, the philosopher versifies the courtly love between Giuliano (Giulio in the poem), Lorenzo's brother, and Simonetta Vespucci. Simonetta, the celebrated and – not without Lorenzo having a hand in the matter – almost cultishly revered beauty, died at the age of 22 from consumption.[11] For Warburg, as for Emil Jacobsen, who significantly contributed to the comprehension of Italian Renaissance art, *La Primavera* is an elegy on the young Simonetta's death.[12] Jacobsen describes the scene on the right side, where Chloris is grabbed by the uncanny, pale Zephyros, as the moment when Simonetta dies, with Hermes (Mercury) on the left side being the psychopompos who accompanies the deceased into the underworld. Such an interpretation is in blatant opposition to the dedication of the painting as a wedding gift.

Several authors, Ernst Gombrich in particular, dismissed the connection between *La Primavera* and the *Stanze* as only superficial and hence denied a close relationship between it and Simonetta's fate.[13] Gombrich pointed out another quandary: The figure of Venus[14] in the centre of the painting baffles the beholder. Does she preside over and bless the scene before her or is she raising her right arm in defence? Does her face express love, joy or sadness? Does she listen to herself absorbedly or is she conducting the dancing Graces? With a touch of irony, Gombrich collects from the literature a perplexing variety of conflicting perceptions.[15] He delivers the following verdict: 'With [Botticelli] we lack the guidance which the fixed formulae of medieval art give us for the reading of gestures and situations, and his mastery of the intricacies of expressions has not yet caught up with this

[10] Aby Warburg, *Sandro Botticellis 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'* (Hamburg: Leopold-Voss-Verlag, 1893).

[11] A recent medical study (Paolo Pozzilli, Luca Vollero, and Anna Maria Colao, 'Venus by Botticelli and Her Pituitary Adenoma', *Endocrine Practice*, 25 (2019), 1067–1073, ascribes Simonetta's death to the growth of a pituitary adenoma. The study hinges on the alleged identification of a number of Simonetta portraits within the work of Botticelli by a face recognition software application and the construction of a timeline for the physiognomic evolution of the latter. According to the authors, this evolution reflects the typical progress of a pituitary adenoma. However, the recognition of identical portraits by the software is unsurprising in view of the strongly idealised figures that Botticelli produced and should not be taken to indicate that all of the images represent Simonetta. Furthermore, establishing a timeline is not straightforward as the dates of the various paintings are often disputed.

[12] Emil Jacobsen, 'Allegoria della Primavera di Sandro Botticelli', *Archivo Storico dell' Arte*, 2nd series, Anno III, fasc. 5 (1897), pp. 321–340; Emil Jacobsen, 'Merkur als Psychopompos: Kleiner Nachtrag zu Botticellis Frühling', *Preussisches Jahrbuch* 102 (1900), 141–143.

[13] Ernst H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (Phaidon Press, 1978), p. 37.

[14] Another identification of this figure was proposed by Giacomo Montanari, who sees her as Juno and restricts his interpretation to Ovid's *Fasti*. See 'Il Giardino delle Esperidi: La Primavera di Botticelli riletta secondo Ovidio', *Il capitale culturale*, 11 (2015), 71–97. Jean Gillies sees the Egyptian Isis in the central figure; see 'The central figure in Botticelli's Primavera', *Woman's Art Journal*, 2(1) (1981), 12–16.

[15] Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, p. 38 and p. 204, note 23.

new problem.'[16] Therefore, Gombrich concludes, deciphering the states of mind of Botticelli's figures is difficult. But this opinion contrasts blatantly with the judgement of other art historians. Tancred Borenius writes about Botticelli's perfect mastery of human expression,[17] and Andreas Schumacher notes Botticelli's extraordinary skill at creating individual, psychologically sophisticated portraits,[18] to list just two examples. Gombrich considered possible double meanings in Renaissance artifacts which could justify opposing interpretations. However, he discarded the idea: 'To my knowledge neither Vasari nor any other text of the fifteenth or sixteenth century ever says that any painting or sculpture is intended to have two divergent meanings or to represent two distinct events through the same set of figures. [...] It is indeed hard to imagine what purpose such a double image should serve within the context of a given cycle or decoration.'[19]

There is also a dissent in the literature about the relationship between *La Nascita di Venere* and *La Primavera*. Aby Warburg stated in his thesis that

> [es kann] nicht mehr zweifelhaft sein, dass die *Geburt der Venus* und *Der Frühling* einander ergänzen: Die *Geburt der Venus* stellte das Werden der Venus dar, wie sie aus dem Meere aufsteigend von den Zephyrwinden an das cyprische Ufer getrieben wird, der sogenannte *Frühling* den darauffolgenden Augenblick: Venus in königlichem Schmuck in ihrem Reiche erscheinend; über ihrem Haupte in den Kronen der Bäume und auf dem Boden unter ihren Füssen breitet sich das neue Gewand der Erde in unübersehbarer Blüthenpracht aus und um sie herum, als treue Helfer ihrer Herrin, die über alles, was der Blüthezeit gehört, gebietet, sind versammelt: Hermes, der die Wolken scheucht, die Grazien, die Sinnbilder der Jugendschönheit, Amor, die Göttin des Frühlings und der Westwind, durch dessen Liebe Flora zur Blumenspenderin wird.[20]

In short, he does not doubt that *La Nascita di Venere* and *Primavera* complement each other. Based on the similarity he remarked between Botticelli's alleged Simonetta portraits (in particular the one in Frankfurt) and the spring deity, he believes the paintings to be immortalisations of Simonetta. According to Warburg, the mysterious gesture of Venus, who seems almost sad, hints at the pale reflection of her transitory earthly power.

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[16] Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, p. 39.

[17] Tancred Borenius, *Italian painting up to Leonardo and Raphael* (Avalon Press and Collins, 1946).

[18] Andreas Schumacher, 'Der Maler Sandro Botticelli', in *Botticelli: Bildnis, Mythos, Andacht*, ed. by Andreas Schumacher (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), pp. 15–56 (p. 26).

[19] Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, pp. 19–20.

[20] 'There is no longer any doubt that *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera* complement each other: *The Birth of Venus* displays the emergence of Venus as she, rising from the sea, is driven by the Zephyrs towards the cyprian shore. The so-called *Primavera* displays the subsequent moment: Venus, appearing in royal attire in her empire, with the the earth's new garment, an unfathomable splendor of flowers, clothing the crown of the trees above her head and spreading below her feet. Around her convene aides loyal to their mistress, who commands everything which belongs to the period of blooms: Hermes, who dispels the clouds; the Graces, allegories of youthful beauty; Amor, the goddess of spring and the West Wind, whose love transforms Flora into the giver of flowers' (trans. by the author and M. Oppenheimer). Warburg, *Sandro Botticellis 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'*, p. 39.

The connection postulated by Warburg between the two paintings was soon contested. There are significant stylistic differences, as Jacobsen states, 'mentre la venere è luce nella luce, la Primavera (si direbbe forse oggi simbolicamente) è luce sull'ombra.'[21] In addition, *La Nascita* is painted on canvas, whereas *La Primavera* is painted on wood. Documents recovered by Shearman and Smith in 1975 show that the two paintings did not originally hang side by side in the Villa di Castello, where Malabecchiano saw them in 1540 and, later, Vasari. Rather, *La Primavera* originally decorated a *lettuccio*, supposedly in the bride's room within the old Palazzo Medici in the Via Larga. In addition, *La Nascita* was almost surely painted after *La Primavera*, so the order of their creation is inverse to the mythologic chronology. In consequence, the idea of a nexus between the two paintings is generally dismissed.

Yet it is remarkable how well the paintings can be joined, even without changing their relative sizes, as shown in Fig. 2. A link between the two paintings may have been observed long before Warburg's day. Jerzy Miziołek calls attention to a cassone panel by Jacopo del Sellaio which displays the story of Cupid and Psyche.[22] Part of this panel contains an apparent allusion to Botticelli's *La Primavera*. The three Graces, a figure representing Venus that resembles Botticelli's, Flora, and Chloris being chased by Zephyros can be seen. However, Mercury is hovering above the group instead of Amor. Even a nude Venus appears in the background although there is no obvious reason for her appearance, as Miziołek points out. The whole arrangement of the actors seems to have been inspired by both of Botticelli's paintings. This apparent citation of Botticelli in Sellaio's panel, which was painted about ten years after *La Primavera,* suggests that Sellaio considered *La Nascita* and *La Primavera* to belong together. Warburg's conjecture of a relationship between the two paintings is resurgent in recent publications. According to Monica Centanni, for example, recent analyses show that the time lapse between the fabrication of Botticelli's paintings was smaller than assumed previously. She describes *La Nascita* as a prequel to *La Primavera*, adopting Warburg's hypothesis in that regard.[23]

If one tentatively adopts Warburg's idea of viewing the paintings in conjunction with one another, a strikingly consistent iconographic programme appears, though slightly different from that which Warburg suggests. Hora is awaiting Venus' arrival in front of a blossoming orange grove, and this grove continues in *Primavera*. On both edges of the joint image, two winged creatures (Zephyroi?) approach. The one on the left is blown into the scene as if on the wings of a storm and carries a maiden-like figure. On the right, an uncanny being, pale bluish-grey, forcibly seizes the young nymph. This nearly symmetric juxtaposition at the beginning and the end of the joint paintings brings to mind the

[21] 'While *Venus* is light in brightness, *La Primavera* (as one could perhaps say today symbolically) is light on shadow' (trans. by the author). Jacobsen, 'Allegoria della Primavera di Sandro Botticelli', p. 324.

[22] Jerzy Miziołek, 'Jacopo del Sellaio's adaptation of the Primavera', in *Botticelli Past and Present,* ed. by Ana Debenedetti und Caroline Elam (UCL Press, 2019), pp. 73–90.

[23] Centanni, '26 aprile', 106–147 (II.1 'La Datazione').

reincarnation myth which Socrates tells to his friends shortly before he puts himself to death in Plato's *Phaedo*:

> λέγεται δὲ οὕτως, ὡς ἄρα τελευτήσαντα ἕκαστου δαίμων [...] ἐπιχειρεῖ εἰς δή τινα τοπον, οἳ δεῖ τοὺς συλλεγέντας διαδικασαμένους εἰς Ἅιδου πορεύστθαι μετὰ ἡγεμόνος ἐκείνου ᾧ δὴ προστέτακται τοὺς ἐνθένδε ἐκεῖσε πορεῦσαι· τυχόντας δὲ ἐκεῖ ὧν δὴ τυχεῖν καὶ μείναντας ὃν χρὴ χρόνον ἄλλος δεῦρο πάλιν ἡγεμὼν κομίζει ἐν πολλαῖς χρόνου καὶ μακραῖς περιόδοις.[24]

Figure 2. Sandro Botticelli, *La Nascita di Venere* (left) and *La Primavera* (right) as a mythological representation of life from birth to death. The relative proportions of the paintings are maintained in the reproductions. *La Nascita di Venere,* c. 1485, tempera on canvas, 172.5 × 278.5 cm. *La Primavera*, c. 1480, tempera grassa on wood, 207 × 319 cm. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence. © Gallerie degli Uffizi.

[24] Plato, *Phaedo*, 107 d5–e4. 'It is said that, when each person has met his end, the spirit (*daimōn*) of each […] undertakes to bring him to a certain place, where the assembled individuals are judged and then must travel to Hades with that guide who has been appointed to take them on their journey there. Once there, the things happen to them that are to happen to them, and they stay for as long as they must, and then another guide escorts them back here again, after many long cycles of time.' The translation, by David Ebray, appears in his *Plato's* Phaedo*: Forms, Death and the Philosophical Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 277.

Thus, the left group could be identified with the guides (ἡγεμόνες) carrying the soul (*psyche*) into this life. The soul clings timidly to her guide, and yet she is looking forward to her birth. Accordingly, the visible exhalation of breath from her mouth does not signify that she is a chubby-faced Zephyros, as Warburg suggests,[25] but a spiritual being. She is the soul of the marvelous Venus viz. Simonetta, *Regina della Belleza*, who enters this world naked and approaches the shore, the land of the living.[26] Doesn't Simonetta say to Giulio in the *Stanze per la Giostra* 'Meraviglia di mie bellezze tenere non prender già, ch'io nacqui in grembo a Venere'?[27] Traditionally, Simonetta is said to have been born in Portovenere. Hora, the deity of time, stands at the water's edge, ready to enclose her with the red mantle of flesh and blood, that is, to incarnate her and thus let her enter into temporary existence.

The next group, encompassing the seemingly absent-minded young man, who is fumbling in the clouds with his caduceus, and the three Graces, one of whom eyes him conspicuously, is a faithful representation of lines in the *Stanze*:

> Ah quanti ninfe per lui sospirono!
> Ma fu sí altero sempre il giovinetto,
> che mai le ninfe amanti nol piegorno,
> mai poté riscaldarsi il freddo petto.[28]

Further on one reads:

> Tosto Cupido entro a' begli occhi ascoso
> al nervo adatta del suo stral la cocca,
> poi tira quell col braccio poderoso,
> tal che raggiugne e l'una e l'altra cocca;
> la man sinistra con l'oro focoso
> la destra poppa colla corda tocca:
> né pria per l'aer ronzando esce 'l quadrello,
> che Iulio drento al cor sentito ha quello.[29]

The image evoked by the poem is hard to depict. Botticelli solves the problem by showing Amor aiming at one of the Charites, who in turn gazes at Mercury/Giulio. In this way, the

[25] Warburg, *Sandro Botticellis 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'*, p. 4.

[26] For the oneness of Venus and Psyche, compare Edgar Wind, *Heidnische Mysterien in der Renaissance* (Suhrkamp-Verlag, 1984), p. 142.

[27] *Stanze de messer Angelo Politiano cominciate per la giostra del magnifico Giuliano di Pietro de Medici*, i, 53. 'Do not marvel at my young beauty, for I was born in the lap of Venus.' The translation, by D. Quint, appears in *The Stanze of Angelo Poliziano* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

[28] *Stanze*, i, 10. 'How many nymphs sighed for him! But the amorous nymphs could never make the arrogant boy yield, nor could his cold breast be warmed' (trans. by D. Quint).

[29] Stanze, i, 40. 'Quickly, Cupid, hidden in those beautiful eyes adjusts the notch of his arrow to his bowstring, then he draws back with his powerful arm so that the two ends of the bow meet; his left hand is touched by the point of fiery gold, his right breast by the string: the arrow does not begin to hiss through the air before Julio has felt it inside his heart' (trans. by D. Quint).

arrow will hit him in the heart. The next figure in the foreground is Flora, scattering the flowers that she cradles in her lap. Such a scene occurs twice in the *Stanze*:

> [...] e ghirlandetta aveva contesta
> Di quanti fior creassi mai natura
> De' quai tutta dipinta era sua vesta.
> E come prima al gioven puose cura,
> Alquanto paurosa alzò la testa;
> Poi colla bianca man ripreso il limbo
> Levossi in piè con di fior pieno un grembo.[30]

Simonetta is described thus when Giulio sees her for the first time amidst the clearing in the wood. Later in the *Stanze*, the image recurs:

> Quasi in un tratto vista amata e tolta
> Dal fero Pluto, Proserpina pare
> sovra un gran carro, e la sua chioma sciolta
> a' zefiri amorosi ventilare;
> la bianca vesta in un bel grembo accolta
> sembra I colti fioretti giú versare.[31]

This time what is described is the abduction of Persephone by Hades, the grim ruler of the netherworld. Suddenly, the scene from Ovid's *Fasti* appears to be turned in a very different direction, with the nymph being carried off by death. The abducted nymph would be none other than Simonetta/Proserpina at the moment of her death, in Jacobsen's sense.[15] However, why does Chloris rather than Flora exhale flowers from her mouth at the moment of the abduction? Did not d'Ancona identify those flowers as symbols of a wedding, the rose as a token of love, the cornflower as the traditional ornament of brides and the periwinkle as a promise of marital fidelity? Only the white blossom in the flowery arc remains enigmatic to her: Is it a windflower, promising short-lived happiness, or a strawberry blossom, symbolizing seduction and earthly joys?[32] Both are inappropriate for a wedding present.

However, there is another way of looking at this string of flowers. The Greek poet Babrios tells a fable about a rose and a periwinkle, in which the periwinkle envies the rose for her beauty. The rose, however, reminds the periwinkle about the transience of beauty, which contrasts with the eternal life of the periwinkle. As for the cornflower, its Latin

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[30] Stanze, i, 47. She 'had woven a garland out of as many flowers as nature ever created, the flowers with which her garment was decorated. As first she noticed the youth, she somewhat timidly raised her head; Then having gathered up the hem of her skirt with her white hand, she rose to her feet, her lap filled with flowers' (trans. by D. Quint).

[31] Stanze, i, 113. 'Proserpina appears, almost in a moment, to be seen, loved, and carried away by fierce Pluto in his great chariot; her loosened hair is blown about by the amorous breezes; her white garment gathered into a fair lap seems to pour down the flowers she has picked' (trans. by D. Quint).

[32] D'Ancona, *Botticelli's Primavera*, p. 57.

name is centaurea. It was named after the sage Chiron, the great medic, who is said to have used it for the healing of wounds. The windflower, which withers swiftly, corresponds to the rose. Finally, the periwinkle has been held in high esteem since ancient times for its medicinal properties; its leaves are applied to encourage hemostasis in pulmonary tuberculosis.[33] Such an interpretation would explain why it is not the happy Flora in Botticelli's painting who exhales the flowers. Instead, it is Simonetta, sick from consumption, who at the very moment when the daimon of death is gripping her, vomits the flowers like a hemorrhage from her mouth, which is opened in fear. Considering the healing properties of centaurea and periwinkle rather than their symbolism in traditional wedding rituals does not seem to be odd given that painters, medics and pharmacists belonged to the same guild.

Thus, the iconographic programme, this time read from left to right, could be interpreted as a symbolic account of Simonetta's birth, life and tragically premature death. This would resolve some of the discrepancies and ambiguities which persist if *La Primavera* is considered a wedding present. However, the latter interpretation is supported by rather convincing arguments: an irritating dichotomy! Gombrich's notion of a double meaning would do justice to both sides: to the present majority opinion, which has been supported by the findings of Shearman and Smith, as well as to the intuition of early art historians. Thus, even though Gombrich himself discarded that possibility, further arguments for a double meaning will be presented in the following.

According to this concept, Botticelli could have crafted the *Primavera* painting for the wedding by order of the Medici but then, complementing it with the *Nascita*, turned it into a metaphoric vita of Simonetta, an elegy on the death of the beloved *sans pareille*. Whether he would have done this solely for himself or with the cognisance of Lorenzo il Magnifico remains a matter of speculation. It might seem odd to combine two so contrasting, if not contradictory, motives in the *Primavera*. However, Botticelli is known to have hidden jokes and elusive messages in his paintings, a well-known example being the fresco of St. Augustin in the church of Ognissanti in Florence. In his study of Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, Stéphane Toussaint remarks Botticelli's sharp-wittedness. The artist is said to have cajoled onlookers into seeing one thing in a painting but then its opposite ('fair accroire qu'on y avait vu une chose et son contraire').[34] Isn't that what we experience here, now not as a joke but in earnest?

Once one admits a possible double meaning in the mythological paintings, the paradoxical interpretations cited by Gombrich become understandable. Considering *Primavera* as a wedding present, some critics perceive the central figure as a graciously blessing Venus. Other critics, who view the painting as an elegy on Simonetta, see a mournfully denying Venus. Simonetta is depicted with all the signs of pregnancy because

[33] Cattabiani, *Florario*, p. 392.

[34] 'Make believe, that one has seen something and its opposite' (trans. by the author). Stéphane Toussaint, *Le songe de Botticelli* (Éditions Hazan, 2022), p. 14.

the bearing of numerous progeny was seen as the prime aim of marriage. That Venus, blessed with a fruitful womb, blesses the bride Semiramide is an auspicious omen for the young couple. However, she must dolefully deny Simonetta this completion of a woman's existence.

One more remark: Below the feet of Chloris, who is just being taken away by the daimon, a beautiful iris is blooming, the only one in the painting (Fig. 3). Not only does an iris appear on the coat of arms of Florence but also Iris is the emissary of the gods, who accompanies dying Dido into the other world after her separation from Aeneas. 'Per questo motivo I Greci piantavano il fiore di iris sulle tombe' relates Alfredo Cattabiani in his wonderful book on plant symbolism.[35] It may well be that Botticelli 'per questo motivo' planted it as an epitaph for Simonetta in the garden of Venus.

Figure 3. Sandro Botticelli, The iris at the feet of Chloris, detail of *La Primavera*, c. 1480, tempera grassa on wood, 207 × 319 cm. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence. © Gallerie degli Uffizi.

[35] Cattabiani, *Florario*, p. 596. 'For that reason, the Greeks planted irises on the graves' (trans. by the author).

A recent interpretation of Botticelli's mythological paintings by Monica Centanni has several aspects in common with the version presented here.[36] As previously mentioned, Centanni, too, takes up Warburg's suggestion that the two paintings belong together. She considers *La Nascita* a prequel to *La Primavera,* realised comparatively soon after the latter. She proposes several arguments for the identification of Mercury with Giuliano, the younger brother of Lorenzo il Magnifico. This agrees with the reading from left to right proposed here. While joining the mainstream opinion of considering *La Primavera* a wedding present for Semiramide, she nevertheless recognises several allusions to Simonetta. Her solution for the ambiguity is elegant: In her interpretation, the paintings celebrate the wedding of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco with Semiramide Appiani as the final, fortunate fulfilment of the sadly incomplete love story between Giuliano and Simonetta, thus viewing the young couple as a reincarnation of their tragic forerunners. This is an attractive idea but does not explain some of the observations discussed above, such as the deviation from Ovid's original tale or the remarkable symmetry of the Zephyroi, the one carrying the youthful and expectant soul into the joint paintings and the other one dragging frightened Chloris away. Furthermore, it seems odd that the young groom, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, should appear in the painting in the form of the murdered Giuliano – not a very auspicious omen! The same could be said about Semiramide and the all too short-lived Simonetta. Finally, it is not obvious why the iconographic idea Centanni proposes would call for the *Nascita* prequel.

Conclusion: Botticelli's Sense of Ambiguity

Frank Zöllner's remark about the exclusion of 'arbitrary hermeneutic options' has to be taken with a grain of salt. The present discussion focused on one particular strand of interpretations only. Botticelli's paintings can be viewed from a very different perspective as well. Interpretations centred around an astrological or alchemical symbolism[37] are certainly not farfetched in view of the obsession of the quattrocento with those subjects. We do not know what Botticelli's intention was when he took us into the labyrinthic garden of Venus. It remains for us to explore that wonderful cosmos in all directions.

[36] Centanni, '26 aprile', 106–47.

[37] Barbara Gallati, 'An Alchemical Interpretation of the Marriage between Mercury and Venus', in *Botticelli's Primavera: A Botanical Interpretation including Astrology, Alchemy and the Medici*, ed. M. Levi d'Ancona (Leo S. Olschki, 1983), pp. 99–121; Jean Gillies, *Botticelli's Primavera: The Young Lorenzo's Transformation* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2010); Alison M. Roberts, 'Feminine Alchemy, Egyptian Hermes, and Botticelli's Primavera: The Quest for the Golden Fruit', *Quaderni di Studi Indo-Mediterranei* 14 (2022), 267–304.

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