

DEBORAH PARKER
BRONZINO: RENAISSANCE PAINTER AS POET
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illustrations.

When Bronzino's paintings are compared with those of Raphael or Titian, critics have long noted in Bronzino's clear lines a figural representation that eludes introspection. Combined, the inability to discern the subjects' conscience and the scant resources purveying information of Bronzino's life have made Bronzino himself an elusive figure to posterity. However, this painter was also a poet and, as Parker so elegantly illuminates, a quite successful one – at least within the circles he frequented. In this meticulous study, Parker affords Bronzino's heretofore little considered poetry the literary dignity it deserves and reveals that analyzing Bronzino's complete artistic production – both the painting and the poetry – provides insight to his views, artistic intentions and life, which until now, remained sealed in the impenetrable surfaces of his canvases.

Parker divides her study into four parts. The first chapter discusses Bronzino's satirical burlesque poems, or *capitoli*. The second chapter addresses the second component of Bronzino's poetry – his sonnets. The penultimate examines the lyric tradition that celebrated artistic virtuosity and the relation of such tradition to sonnets of this type appearing in Bronzino's *canzoniere*. This then leads to a discussion of Bronzino's thoughts on artistic matters as revealed in his *capitoli*. The last chapter analyzes Bronzino's famous painting, the *Allegory of Venus*, and his little analyzed poem, "Il piato" to show how a study of his poetry can help better understand his painting.

Parker concentrates on Bronzino's literary culture and the analysis of his poetic production. She reveals how Bronzino's two poetic registers, the burlesque and the solemn, indeed coincide in his art and how the study of both provides greater understanding of Bronzino's sense of despair and irony. She sees Bronzino, as a painter and a poet, as highly skilled, but not a visionary. Bronzino may indeed have produced elusive paintings, but his poetry reveals that this was Bronzino's systematic intention. His poetic language intentionally creates multiple meanings that evade exact interpretation and his allegories are often inconclusive – much in the same way Bronzino seems to have viewed the world. On both levels then, Bronzino's art does not offer conclusive answers, but "fashions an intricate and nuanced world in which submission replaces pursuit of an ideal" (p. 169).

In his own lifetime, both Bronzino's *capitoli* and sonnets were published. His *capitoli* were included in some of the most popular anthologies of

burlesque poetry of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, while his sonnets, though given less attention, were included in publications by the poetess Laura Battiferri, Benvenuto Cellini and in a collection of poems occasioned by the death of Michelangelo. Parker notes that Bronzino frequented and befriended members of the highest Florentine literary circles and that his poetic achievements were recognized by the likes of Benedetto Varchi, Luca Martini and Giorgio Vasari, among others. At various times, Bronzino was a member of the Accademia Fiorentina and well known by its members for his knowledge of Petrarch and Dante.

The model for burlesque poetry in Bronzino's time was Francesco Berni and Bronzino made notable use of his style. Berni skilfully used complicated burlesque language to tell an obscene story about a seemingly mundane object and deride the presiding influence of Petrarchism. These characteristics are found in Bronzino's poetry, specifically in his poem, "Del pennello" and his parodies of Dantean and Petrarchan themes. Parker finds in Bronzino's obscenity and absurdity, the desire to create ambiguity. Bronzino was completely aware of the burlesque linguistic code, but limiting the reading of his poetry to a strict decryption takes away from the multiple, but not so exact, meanings Bronzino seems to intend. The *capitoli* display Bronzino's ability to mock, entertain, eroticize and be utterly honest. Parker urges that more attention be paid to the possibly subversive elements in Bronzino's painting: in the *Portrait of Giovanni de' Medici*, the young Giovanni is holding his pet bird, but when considering the many meanings of "uccello", and the frequency of its appearance in burlesque poetry, Bronzino, without explicitly admitting anything, allows for an abundance of meanings.

Bronzino's *canzoniere* makes-up the other half of his poetic repertoire. It has received little and unfavourable critical attention in the past, but Parker's re-reading of it as a whole provides useful insight to Bronzino's personal world. Bronzino follows the prevailing anthological practice of his time in not unifying his *canzoniere* around an amatory theme. Parker notes that approximately one-third of the *canzoniere* consists of correspondence poems, which actually include the *proposte* and *risposte* of Bronzino's correspondents. In his own *canzoniere*, Bronzino substitutes Petrarch's idea of a great love as the gravitational centre of poetry with the inspiration derived from his loyal group of friends. If in his *capitoli* Bronzino parodied Petrarchan themes, in his sonnets he shows himself to be a faithful follower. The use of Petrarchan language allowed him access to the upper levels of Florentine society and a vehicle suitable for praising the achievements of his friends and patrons. Parker found that Bronzino's skill in utilizing Petrarchan vocabulary lied not in his ability to recreate it, but in his ability to integrate successfully whole lines and key words into his own poems. She also reflects on the relationship to be deduced from the language Bronzino used to praise

the Medici in his sonnets and the way of representing them in art. In poetry, as well as in art, Bronzino lavished praise on his patrons, asserting their justness and right to rule, and “the poems bring this transaction into greater focus” (p. 44).

The attention Parker pays to Bronzino’s *canzoniere* and the contrast in his two styles of poetry yield significant meaning. The Bronzino that emerges from the *canzoniere* is a private one, one that celebrates the lives and achievements of his friends, and one that mourns the passing of many of them. Parker divides the *canzoniere* in two parts: the first addresses a wide variety of themes; the second consists almost completely of elegiac poems. The *capitoli* show his public side, his satirical and transgressive side. Parker searches for some deeper meaning in this division and she finds that he praises, he mourns and he criticizes, but he never has the answer and he never reveals what he may really believe. Bronzino becomes one more artist, poet, human being in search of truth, but plagued by “a profound sense of loss, alienation, and decline” (p. 126). He is thus able to create intricate worlds within his paintings, but the possible meanings are many and he does not provide the answer.

Parker’s collaborative study of Bronzino’s poetry and art also unveils a consistency in his use of superior models. Bronzino was a strong supporter of hard, diligent study based on imitation. He readily incorporated Petrarch, Dante and other classical models into his poetry and critics have long noted Michelangelo’s influence on his art. A sort of system emerges. Bronzino seems to delight in the many meanings such allusions lend to his own work. His ability to imitate and adopt are no small part of his art. In one particular *capitolo* discussed by Parker, he even expresses his doubts concerning the habits of younger artists, their lack of study and their belief in artistic licence, but ends it inconclusively, saying that he does not know if posterity may prefer their style. For Bronzino, Michelangelo is artistic truth and Bronzino stays true to his models, following the examples of those who have done the best, but he does not present us with clear answers.

In the final chapter of her book, Parker examines Bronzino’s most famous, and possibly most ambiguous painting, the *Allegory of Venus*, and his poem, “Il piato”, his longest allegorical poem, in order to better understand relations unexplored in his work. In the poem, Bronzino invokes a number of sources, principally Dante, but does not then use allegory in any consistent way. He is witty and sly; he uses allegory to expose society’s hypocrisies, but the images evoked never seem conclusive; there are elements that do not fit into any single interpretation. Parker’s analysis reveals that more attention needs to be paid to Bronzino’s playfulness, his sexual puns and aimed ambiguity.

Parker’s exploration of only vaguely surveyed territory provides new, crucial insight into Bronzino’s character and tendencies that allow a more

unified view of his systematic and complex artistic works. Whether it be the incorporation of other models, his praise of friends and patrons, or a piece that leaves more questions than answers, Bronzino was consistent in his poetry and art: “there is no single, overarching approach to art or to life” (p. 169). Parker makes a fundamental contribution to the study of Bronzino. As one of the great master painters of the High Renaissance, an integral analysis of all of Bronzino’s work was long overdue. Bronzino falls into the limited category of artist-poets; he joins elite company and his poetry is just as important to understanding his character, as is that of Michelangelo. This work will be of great interest to scholars of Italian Renaissance Art History.

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