

Liana Cheney. *Quattrocento Neoplatonism and Medici Humanism in Botticelli's Mythological Paintings*. University Press of America: Lanham, Md., 1985. 154 pages. 11 illustrations. \$22.50 (hardcover), \$11.00 (paperback).

There is a good deal of information in this work. Throughout, Cheney is engaged in juggling Lorenzo de' Medici's six balls (12), "five red and one blue," Plato's three "balls" (the Good, the True, and the Beautiful), and Marsilio Ficino's (91) "Twin Venuses" in order to suggest that Beauty (Venus *qua* "humanity," that is, the subject matter of the Liberal Arts) comes ashore (to earth) in its scallop shell to be greeted by Horus (It. *ora*, hour: time), the magnificent envoy of Lorenzo. The "Twin Venuses" first appear on p. 23: "Heavenly Venus (intelligible world—Beauty, and Earthly Venus (corporeal world—bodily form). There are two versions of the Aphrodite origin: one claiming that Venus rose out of the seafoam (Aphrodite Urania), the other claiming she was born from the union of Zeus and Dione (Aphrodite Pandemos). Heavenly Venus is Aphrodite Urania and Earthly Venus is Aphrodite Pandemos." Heavenly Venus is also known as (72) "Venus Anadyomene" (literally, "Venus Rising Up Out Of The Sea"). Obviously Aphrodite Urania suggests the origin of this twin from Uranus (Heaven, Sky), whose son Cronus (Time) proved less than ideally filial. Cronus castrated his father and threw what Poliziano calls (71) "il fusto genital" ("the genital trunk": Cheney, 72) into the sea (38): "the Sky's testicles fell (castration of Uranus or Saturn) into the sea and from the foam of the sea, Aphrodite was born (*Aphros* meaning foam). The seashore in the painting could have meant to Botticelli the shore of Porto Venere (the residence of Simonetta Vespucci) or of Cyprus." Simonetta was Giuliano de' Medici's girlfriend. Both died young; he, assassinated while attending High Mass; she, of tuberculosis. But in the

Neoplatonist's milieu nothing is ever only itself (70–71): "Welliver's interpretation has affinities with van Merle's because both authors claim that Venus represents the eternal feminine ideal of a person's dream and is likened to Dante's Beatrice, Boccaccio's Fiammetta, Petrarch's Laura, Lorenzo's Lucrezia and Giuliano's Simonetta."

It is one of Cheney's theses that, in *Primavera*, *Minerva and the Centaur*, *Mars and Venus*, and *The Birth of Venus*, Botticelli made (45) "no division between sign and symbol," in keeping with Quattrocento practice. "Unfortunately, Quattrocento thoughts about mythology are less well known than classical allegories; this causes several problems in understanding the reasoning behind Quattrocento symbols." We seem to be faced with a superabundance of import and an eclecticism of sophisticated interpretation. Thus, for example, since *nihil obstat*, Cheney tells us that (73) "Wind follows Horne's position . . . that the *Primavera* and the *Birth of Venus* represent the two conceptions of Venus—Venus-Urania (*Venere Celeste*) and Venus-Pandemos [sic] (*Venere Volgare*)—presented by the Neoplatonists." Earlier (20), Cheney had written that "Plotinianism [sic] is a theocentric form of thought," which features "the One" as "the eternal source of existence." (Actually, the One in Plotinism is the eternal source of being.) In what follows, there is an obvious typographical error, "emotion" for "emanation": "all reality is an emotion of God." But Cheney makes her point (25): "Lorenzo's attitude towards the arts reveals his feeling for Neoplatonism; art was required to move the soul of the individual through painting; abstract representation stirred up the person's sensitivity creating in one new internal and spiritual states which culminated in spiritual ecstasy." Beauty was the soul of art and "love" the activator. But "Beauty" ("splendor") and "love" equals Venus; more accurately, "Twin Venuses" (23):

. . . Ficino emphasizes that Venus-Urania resides in the sphere of Angelic Mind