

Forbidden Fruit

Since its inception, Botticelli's *Primavera* has eluded a clear meaning, inspiring a variety of interpretations among scholars. The goal of this essay is to propose a certain interpretation of the painting that integrates some of the primary interpretations of the painting today. The three primary interpretations brought up in the essay center around the themes of Spring, marriage, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, interconnected by the motifs of motion and flourishing. The surface-level meaning of the painting, a portrayal of Spring, establishes these two key motifs and provides context for the deeper meaning in the painting, the importance of a marriage to God. In *Primavera*, Botticelli expresses that the path to achieve the elevated life with God is through devotion and submission.

The setting embodies Springtime, setting up the idea of flourishing and providing context for deeper interpretations. The first hint of Spring is seen in the setting, which takes place in a dark forest uninterrupted by human intervention. Flowers and plants of various colors and species are scattered over the ground, mirrored by the oranges in the trees above. In the orange trees is the first allusion to the Neoplatonic philosophy, the key philosophy of the Medici family, who's coat of arms features several colorful balls mirroring the oranges in the trees. The abundance of life in the flowers and fruit, as well as the density of the foliage, suggests this painting is taking place during the Spring, a time of blossoming and flourishing for all forms of life.

In addition to the setting, the characters embody the passage of Spring, adding the motif of motion to flourishing, emphasizing their innate connection. On the far right is Zephyrus, the ancient Greek God of the West Wind, traditionally known to blow the life into Spring with his wind. This facet of his identity is compounded by his story represented in *Primavera*, where he rapes Chloris, the figure to the viewer's left of him, and turns her into Flora, the goddess of

flowering plants, after he marries her. This story represents the birth of Spring, as the West Wind that brings Spring is impregnating the Goddess of flowers to give birth to the season. This transition is emphasized by Boticelli, as Chloris has her hands extended out towards Flora, indicating an attempt to find protection and refuge in her from Zephyrus. Furthermore, a vine of flowers extends out of Chloris's mouth to Flora's shoulder, integrating seamlessly with the flowers already on her dress, portraying the connection and transition of Chloris into Flora. The progression of Spring is carried in in the central figure, Venus, as well as the leftmost figure, Mercury. Venus, the goddess of love, represented the month of April, while Mercury represents May, the final month of Spring. This progression of Spring from right to left establishes the importance of motion in the painting, emphasizing that the blossoming depicted in Spring is intrinsically tied to its motion – flourishing cannot happen in stillness.

The motifs of flourishing and motion are picked up and developed in the depiction of Marriage in the painting. The marriage theme is partially derived from context, as “most art historians now believe the Primavera was commissioned on the occasion of the wedding of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici to Semiramide d'Appia” (Zirpolo, p.1). The painting hung in the marital chambers of the couple, providing some legitimacy to interpretations related to themes of marriage. In the actual painting, the theme of marriage is most clearly embodied in the central figure of Venus, who stands underneath her son Cupid and in front of an arch composed of trees. The arch provides a structure which draws the viewer towards Venus, and her eyes are directed out of the page, indicating an awareness of the viewer. The combination of the arch, her awareness, and her position in the approximate center of the painting, places importance on her as the central figure. Furthermore, while it seems the rest of the characters are standing roughly in line, Venus stands behind the rest of the scene, as if she is overlooking and presiding over the marriage depicted (Zirpolo, p. 4). Thus, Venus's status as goddess of love, along with her central

importance and spatial removal from the rest of the actions, indicate that she is acting as a goddess presiding over the love affair – a marriage.

The presence of the rape scene adds to the marriage theme the element of submission and devotion in marriage. The rape of Chloris embodies an extreme form of forced submission, accentuated by the animalistic characteristics of the scene. Chloris's expression is fearful and turned behind her, while her feet are directed the other way, indicating she is running away out of fear and is being hunted down by Zephyrus like an animal. According to Zirpolo, "the image representing the rape of Chloris by Zephyrus... served to instruct the bride to submit to her new husband for the sake of order, stability, and the continuation of the race, or as in this case, the Medici family" (p. 3). In other words, the complete submission of power that happens in rape must also happen in marriage if that marriage is to succeed.

The theme of marriage is developed further through Cupid and the Graces. Cupid is directing his arrow at the central Grace, known to be Chastity, who is gazing upon Mercury, indicating she will marry him (Zirpolo, p. 2). The Grace's marriage to Mercury has obvious ramifications, as by embodying chastity the marriage indicates that the love is a purer love, one not related to sexual desires and urges. This leads to an asymmetry between marriage on the left and right, as the marriage on the right-hand side is more animalistic and cruder, while on the left-hand side it is elevated and purer. This asymmetry plays into the motion of the painting, as the marriage flourished as it moved to the left from the right in the same manner as Spring. The motif of submission appears ubiquitous, as Chastity had no control over Cupid's arrow and thus had no choice but to submit to the marriage. This contrast between asymmetry and symmetry suggests that even in motion – this time a transition from carnal, physical love to chaste, idealistic love – there must be some constant, in this case submission.

Motion and flourishing are developed even further with the connection to Christianity and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. According to Max Marmor, "our earliest witnesses agree that Botticelli had a serious and abiding interest in Dante, and their testimony receives ample confirmation from several of his surviving works" (p. 200). As with the perception of marriage in the painting, the presence of Dante's influence is heavily supported by historical context. Moreover, the groupings of the characters allude to both Christianity and Dante as they are structured in threes, reminiscent of the heavy use of triplets in Dante and the trinity in Christianity. The Graces come as a group of three, the rape of Chloris features three figures, and finally the triplet of Venus, Mercury, and Cupid, connected not through proximity but through the red of their garments – something absent in the other characters. Moreover, there are nine total figures for a total of three groups, similar of the groupings of triples into further triples in Dante, meant to emphasize the importance of the trinity.

In addition to the groupings, Venus serves as an allusion to the Virgin Mary, both in her positioning in the frame of the painting and the positioning of her body. She is under an arch, a traditional backdrop for the Virgin Mary, and is accompanied by her son, Cupid, similar to how the Mary is typically portrayed with Jesus as a baby. Furthermore, Venus holds her hand up to her right, a gesture common to portrayals of Mary in the Annunciation, where she holds her hand out to the Angel Gabriel. Venus's hand is held facing the left of the painting, indicating once again the directionality of the painting, as well as the importance of divinity in the latter half. Her hand is mirrored by her tilted head, which is directed in the same direction, providing more evidence of the intent behind her hand's gesture.

The motifs of motion and flourishing are layered onto this backdrop via the parallel between the motion of Dante's pilgrim in his *Divine Comedy* and the motion of the painting. Dante's pilgrim starts above the ground, descends into hell, and then exits through Satan's body

to begin his ascent towards *Paradiso* through *Purgatorio*. This motion is roughly U shaped, with the bottom of the U the point where Dante passes through Satan and begins his ascent. This U motion is represented in Primavera through the positioning of the bodies of the various characters. It begins on the upper right, with the tip of Zephyrus's wing. The motion then follows along the wing to Zephyrus's body, the beginning of the downwards portion of the U. The motion is then taken up by Chloris, who's raised back leg indicates the motion leftward, while her downward-facing arms, chest, and legs indicate the downwards motion. The descending part of the U end with Flora, who's pregnancy embodies the passage of the pilgrim through Satan – a form of rebirth. The ascent is begun by the Graces, as when one follows their hand positioning from right to left – the motion of the painting – they are directed upwards at a slant, representing the ascending part of the U. Finally, the motion ends with the upper left clouds, arrived at by following the upwards indication of the Graces and Mercury's own upwards focus and orientation of his body, as he is motioning towards the clouds with his staff. This motion of the painting, mirroring the motion of Dante's pilgrim and his rebirth at the bottom of his descent, indicate that the motion and flourishing depicted in the painting is intertwined with God.

The marriage interpretation is modified and enhanced when combined with the themes of Dante and Christianity. The asymmetry of the two representations of marriage – the crude love on the right vs the pure love on the left – represent the difference between earthly love and divine love. Furthermore, the marriage is no longer referring to a union between man and wife, but rather a union with God. Moreover, the chastity of the pure love, along with the recurring theme of submission, indicates that this marriage to God isn't a sexual one, but rather a complete devotion and submission of the self. Through this devotion, one can reach an elevated life, as in Dante's *Paradiso*.

Primavera has eluded a clear meaning for its entire history. This essay attempted to propose one way to elucidate the meaning, the integration of various analyses and themes in the painting. Each aspect of the painting contributes something essential, and each interpretation – Dante, marriage, and Spring – takes a narrower view on a broader meaning. The view of marriage unveiled the importance of commitment but missed the relation to God. On the other hand, the view of Dante and Christianity in the painting revealed the importance of God and the ascent towards a higher plane but missed the necessary aspect of submission. Taken together, the *Primavera* reveals that in order to ascend to the higher plane of God, one must submit and devote themselves completely.