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Olympic Adultery: Italian Escapades of Mars, Venus and Vulcan

Jan L. de Jong

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the myth of the adultery of Mars and Venus, cuckolding Vulcan, was mostly known through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (IV, 169–189). In translation, it reads:

Even the sun there, who rules the whole world with his flashing rays, even the sun became Love's captive! I shall tell you how he fell in love. This god was the first, so it is thought, to see the shameful behaviour of Venus and Mars: for he sees everything before anyone else. Indignant at their actions, he showed Vulcan, who was Juno's son and Venus' husband, how and where they were misbehaving. Vulcan's senses reeled, and the iron he was forging fell from his hand. At once, he began to fashion slender bronze chains, nets and snares which the eye could not see. The thinnest treads spun on the loom, or cobwebs hanging from the rafters are no finer than was that workmanship. Moreover, he made them so that they would yield to the lightest touch, and to the smallest movement. These he set skillfully around his bed.

When his wife and her lover lay down together upon that couch, they were caught by the chains, ingeniously fastened there by her husband's skill, and were held fast in the very act of embracing. Immediately, the Lemnian Vulcan flung open the ivory doors, and admitted the gods. There lay Mars and Venus, close bound together, a shameful sight. The gods were highly amused; one of them prayed that he too might be so shamed. They laughed aloud, and for long this was the best-known story in the whole of heaven.¹

It is true that several centuries before Ovid the myth had already been told by Homer in the *Odyssey*² and that other antique authors had summarized or

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- 1 Translation by M. M. Innes in the Penguin Classics series (first edition: West Drayton: 1955).
 - 2 8, 266–366. Homer's version is five times longer than the version by Ovid (101 lines instead of 21) and differs from it in the following respects: 1) it stresses Vulcan's limp and makes Vulcan

referred to it,³ including Ovid himself in his *Ars Amatoria*.⁴ However, due to the wide dissemination and uninterrupted popularity of the *Metamorphoses* throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, it was only logical that they would be the most obvious source for artists illustrating the tale.⁵ Its popularity as a source for visual artists during the early modern centuries is evident from the large number of representations in paintings, prints, tapestries, majolica, and other media. In the 15th and 16th centuries the theme of Mars, Venus and Vulcan became so popular in the visual arts that it grew into a category in itself – or even into several categories. But while these various categories were ultimately all based on the *Metamorphoses*, they gradually broke away from Ovid's text and independently developed according to some 'inner logic', where one representation gave rise, as it were, to the next.

Restricting ourselves to paintings and prints that were made during the 16th century in Italy, or elsewhere under evident Italian influence, we will not focus on the question if or how accurately Ovid's text was followed, or which other written version of the tale was possibly used as the textual source.⁶ Instead, we will raise the question: how do the various painted and printed illustrations of the myth allude to each other? Did these references lead to visual

say that Venus despises him for it (308–311; 329–332); 2) only the male gods come to watch Mars and Venus caught in Vulcan's nets; constrained by female modesty, the goddesses stay away; 3) Neptune obtains from Vulcan the release of Mars and Venus.

- 3 On the various antique literary sources of the myth, see Noble-Wood O. J., *A Tale Blazed through Heaven. Imitation and Invention in the Golden Age of Spain* (Oxford: 2014) 12–21, to which should be added: Maurus Servius Honoratus, *In Vergilii Aeneidem commentarii* VI, 14, and Hyginus, *Fabula* CXLVIII.
- 4 II, 561–592. Different from the version in the *Metamorphoses*, it relates that Mars and Venus make fun of Vulcan's limp (II, 567–68) and that Neptune convinces Vulcan to release Mars and Venus (II, 587–88).
- 5 On the survival of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* during the Middle Ages, see Hexter R., "Ovid in the Middle Ages: Exile, Mythographer, and Lover", in Weiden Boyd B. (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Ovid* (Leiden – Boston: 2002), 413–442, and Clark J. G. – Coulson F. T. – McKinley K. L. (eds.), *Ovid in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: 2011).
- 6 This seems an important line of approach in the studies of Cieri Via C., "Venere, Vulcano e Marte. Un' allegoria mitologica nella cultura veneta del Cinquecento", in Horn H.-J. – Walter H. (eds.), *Die Allegorese des antiken Mythos*, Wolfenbütteler Forschungen 75 (Wiesbaden: 1997) 351–394; Ziefer, A., "Marte e Venere sorpresi da Vulcano: la fortuna iconografica di un affresco perduto di Baldassarre Peruzzi per la Villa Farnesina a Roma", in Beltramini M. – Elam C. (eds.), *Some Degree of Happiness. Studi di storia dell'architettura in onore di Howard Burns* (Pisa: 2010) 207–231; and Capretti E., "Fece in Fiorenza molti quadri a più cittadini, sparsi per le loro case': Venere, Marte e Cupido e altri dipinti da camera con 'storie di favole'", in Capretti E. – Forlani Tempesta A. – Padovani S. – Parenti D. (eds.), *Piero di Cosimo 1462–1522. Pittore eccentrico fra Rinascimento e Maniera*, exh. cat., Galleria degli Uffizi (Florence: 2015) 90–105.

conventions in the representations of the myth, and does awareness of these conventions contribute to a better understanding of Mars, Venus and Vulcan illustrations?⁷

1 Illustrating the Thread of the Story

It is illuminating to start with two examples of prints whose makers have tried to illustrate the myth of Mars, Venus and Vulcan in close adherence to the thread of Ovid's text. The first is an engraving by Enea Vico after Francesco Parmigianino, from 1543 [Fig. 5.1].⁸ It shows Vulcan's forge on the right, recognizable due to the bellows on the floor. To the left is a canopy bed, where Venus and Mars are *flagranter* enjoying their *delictum*. Mars has thrown his cuirass

7 I take up the gauntlet of the otherwise excellent article by Nigel Llewellyn: 'The poet's (sc. Ovid) treatment of a story such as 'Venus and Mars' was not very interesting for artists as there were no props or settings to speak of.' ('Illustrating Ovid', in Martindale C. (ed.), *Ovid Renewed. Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: 1988) 151–166, at 153.) My line of approach is similar to the one I followed in an earlier publication on the same topic, but I have tried not to repeat myself and discuss different works of art: Jong J. L. de, "Ovidian Fantasies. Pictorial Variations on the Story of Mars, Venus and Vulcan", in Horn H.-J. – Walter H. (eds.), *Die Rezeption der 'Metamorphosen' des Ovid in der Neuzeit: der antike Mythos in Text und Bild*, Ikonographische Repertorien zur Rezeption des antiken Mythos in Europa. Beihefte 1 (Berlin: 1995) 161–172. My line of approach is close to that of Noble Wood, *A Tale Blazed through Heaven* 11: '... the emphasis throughout this study is on the relationship between imitation and invention, between what poets and painters take from the storehouse stocked by their predecessors and what they add to it for their followers. Anchored in close analysis of individual primary texts, the five chapters look at how poets and painters breathed new life into the same well known mythological tale, examining some of the ways in which the story of Mars, Venus, and Vulcan was disguised, developed, expanded, mocked, combined with or played off against different subjects, or otherwise modified in order to pique the interest of successive generations of readers and viewers.'

There are beautiful illustrations and useful information in Turner J. G., *Eros Visible. Art, Sexuality and Antiquity in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven – London: 2017) 86–191 (chapters 2 and 3: 'Mars and Venus in the Net of Art: From Classical Models to the Villa Farnesina' and 'Venus, Mars and Vulcan in the High Renaissance'), but the author's focus is on different matters than in this contribution.

8 Bartsch A. von, *Le Peintre Graveur* (Vienna: 1803–1821) xv, 294, no. 27. For detailed information, see the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1499351&partId=1&searchText=enea+vico+mars+venus&page=1. The print is discussed by Alberti F., "Divine cuckolds: Joseph and Vulcan in Renaissance Art and Literature", in Matthews-Grieco S. F. (ed.), *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th–17th century)* (Farnham: 2014) 149–180, esp. 162–163.

FIGURE 5.1 Enea Vico, after Francesco Parmigianino, *Mars, Venus and Vulcan*, 1543. Engraving, 22.5 × 33.5 cm (Bartsch XV, 294, no. 27.) London, British Museum
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and arms on the floor, but is still wearing his helmet. Vulcan, meanwhile, is seen working diligently and outwardly undisturbed at his anvil, which is somewhat impractically situated in the same room as the bed – unless one assumes that the different floorings indicate two different rooms. (This latter option might mean that the cuirass and arms on the floor are not Mars's, but products Vulcan stopped working on in order to forge the invisible net.) Although the artist managed to catch some of the humorous spirit of Ovid's text through such details as Mars wearing his helmet while making love, Venus's slippers in front of the bed and, unintentionally I assume, the way Venus's left leg is (not) attached to her body, he did not succeed in expressing the point of the story. Anyone not familiar with Ovid's tale will wonder what to make of a picture showing a black smith working in a bedroom with two lovers actively taking pleasure in each other.

Perhaps we should understand Gian Giacomo Caraglio's print from c. 1550 [Fig. 5.2] as a commentary on or criticism of Vico's print.⁹ In some ways it

9 Bartsch, *Peintre Graveur* xv, 88, no. 52. The print is discussed by Talvacchia B., *Taking Positions. On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: 1999) 158–160, who has missed the similarities (and competition) with the Vico print, and Uchacz T. H., "Mars, Venus, and

FIGURE 5.2 Gian Giacomo Caraglio, *Mars, Venus and Vulcan*, c. 1550. Engraving, 20.7 × 25 cm (Bartsch, xv, 88, no. 52.) Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD), Kupferstich-Kabinett (ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN)

mirrors Vico's illustration, but in contrast it does contain all the important episodes of Ovid's story. The bellows on the floor indicate that Vulcan's forge is on the left (instead of on the right, as in Vico's print). It is divided from the bedroom by a wall with a niche, filled with a statue of Venus born from a shell. The story itself takes place in the bedroom, in four episodes. Apollo, surrounded by rays of sunlight, reveals to Vulcan that his wife is having an affair with Mars. He points to the bed at the right, where the two lovers passionately embrace each other (just as in Vico's print). Vulcan, meanwhile, pulls the string of the indiscernible net in which Mars and Venus will be caught. On a cloud in the sky, seven gods and goddesses watch the events unfold.

Vulcan. Equivocal Erotics and Art in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp", in Kavalier E. M. – Van Bruaene A.-L. (eds.), *Netherlandish Culture of the Sixteenth Century: Urban Perspectives*, Studies in European Urban History 41 (Turnhout: 2017) 245–267, esp. 261–262.

Just as in Vico's print, there are some humorous details, such as the statue of the naked Venus, standing in the *pudica* pose reminiscent of Praxiteles' lust evoking Venus of Cnidos,¹⁰ and Mars wearing a helmet while performing the *delictum flagrans*, having thrown his cuirass and arms on the floor. This time it is Venus's right leg which raises anatomical questions. In his criticism of Vico's print, Caraglio seems to have included more episodes from Ovid's tale, in order to make the story easier to grasp. But in his fervor to illustrate Ovid's text more clearly by including more episodes, he also lost the point of the story. Observers without knowledge of Ovid's tale will wonder why Apollo has to point out the two adulterers to Vulcan, when he is already catching them in his net. Disregarding questions about the roof of Vulcan's house, they may also wonder what exactly the gods in the sky are seeing: is it the complete drama unfolding before their eyes, as if they are watching a theatre play, or just the final episode?

These two awkward renditions of the tale result from the fact that a writer can relate how a story progresses throughout time, one episode after another, while a painter or printmaker is basically tied to one episode at one specific moment, unless he represents the tale in a series of successive pictures, for instance by means of a frieze or a sequence of prints (like a modern comic strip). Enea Vico and Gian Giacomo Caraglio, however, packed several episodes together in one picture, thus creating a visual rendition that we would now call a continuous narrative or *kontinuierende Darstellung*. This way of visually telling a story was not uncommon in the beginning of the sixteenth century. It was recommended by Leonardo da Vinci in his notes on painting,¹¹ and it had been

10 On Praxiteles' lost *Venus of Cnidos* and its impact, see Havelock C. M., *The Aphrodite of Knidos and Her Successors. A Historical Review of the Female Nude in Greek Art* (Ann Arbor, MI: 1995). The lust evoking impact of the statue was described by Pliny the Elder in the *Naturalis Historia* xxxvi, 20, and by Pseudo-Lucian in the dialogue *Erotes*, 13–15. Caraglio had already represented a statue of Venus in a niche in 1526, in a print after Rosso Fiorentino (Bartsch, *Peintre Graveur* xv, 78, n. 33); see Talvacchia, *Taking Positions* 160.

11 Richter J. P., *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci Compiled and Edited from the Original Manuscripts* (London: 1970) I, 270–271, nr. 542: '... e se tu volessi dire in che modo ò a fare la vita d'uno santo compartita in molte storie in una medesima faccia, a questa parte ti rispondo che tu debi porre il primo piano col punto all'altezza dell'occhio de riguardatori d'essa storia, e insù detto piano figura la prima storia grande e poi, diminuendo di mano in mano le figure e casamenti insù diversi colli e pianure, farai tutto il fornimento d'essa storia.' ('... and if you would [have me] tell you how to represent the life of a saint divided into several pictures on one and the same wall, I answer that you must set out the foreground with its point of sight on a level with the eye of the spectator of the scene, and upon this plane represent the more important part of the story large and then, diminishing by degrees the figures, and the buildings on various hills and open spaces, you can represent all the events of the history.')

used by great masters such as Raphael and Andrea del Sarto.¹² As the century proceeded, however, it was used less often and increasingly disapproved of. In *Il Figino overo del Fine della Pittura* of 1591, Gregorio Comanini was clearly struggling with the question whether this was a satisfactory way to illustrate a story and after several pages concluded that a painter should not overpopulate his paintings and not represent more than one storyline:

[...] non è convenevole cosa che egli ingombri la sua tavola di tante immagini e ne faccia una spiacevole confusione [...] Dico bene, che se brama far cosa buona, non dee tumultuare col soverchio numero delle immagini, ma poche rappresentarne, e molte artificiosamente prometterne, se'l inventione il richiede. Dico appresso, non esser bene il confondere diverse azzioni in un quadro, tutto che fossero una sola d'unità formale [...]

Thus, it is not appropriate for the painter to clutter his panel with so many images and create a displeasing confusion with them [...] I do say that, if he desires to do something good, he should not create a riot with the excessive number of his images, but should represent only a few of them and very skillfully suggest them when the invention requires it. It is not good to combine diverse actions in a picture, even though they have a single formal unity [...]

Yet he did not give a clear answer to the question if a *kontinuierende Darstellung* is a fitting, true to life way of visually telling a story.¹³ Seven years earlier, in 1584, Raffaello Borghini had been more explicit in *Il Riposo*. He admitted that some great painters had successfully made *kontinuierende Darstellungen*, but he still thought that they had strayed from the proper way of representing visual reality: 'Just imagine how unlikely it is if in one view we could see three times the same person, who is with one and the same body in three places ...' ('[...] considerate voi quanto poco abbia del verisimile, che noi possiamo in una vista, vedere una persona tre volte, che col medesimo corpo sia in tre luoghi [...]').

12 An example of a *kontinuierende Darstellung* painted by Raphael is his *Liberation of St Peter* in the Stanza d'Eliodoro in the Vatican Palace (1514); examples by Andrea del Sarto are the stories from the life of St Filippo Benizzi in the chiostro of the Ss. Annunziata in Florence (1509–1510) and the stories from the life of St John the Baptist in the Chiostro dello Scalzo, also in Florence (1507–1526).

13 Comanini Gregorio, *Il Figino overo del fine della pittura* (Mantua, Francesco Osanna: 1591) 207–208; translation quoted after: Comanini Gregorio, *The Figino, or On the Purpose of Painting. Art Theory in the Late Renaissance*, ed. Doyle-Anderson A. – Maiorino G. (Toronto: 2001) 86–87.

If painters want to depict more than one episode, they should divide the picture plane into just as many compartments and fill each of them with one episode: 'Quando i pittori vogliono dipignere tante attioni, doverebbono dividere la loro facciata o la lor tavola in piu quadri, ed in ogni quadro fare la sua attione ...'¹⁴ So if painters and printmakers were increasingly expected to reduce a story to one episode, to be represented in one picture, how did they deal with Ovid's tale of Mars, Venus and Vulcan, which to a considerable extent owes its humorous effect to the succession of different episodes? Which (visual) means did they develop to maintain the witty spirit of Ovid's tale?

2 Abandoning the Thread of the Story, Keeping the Witty Spirit

Around 1604, Johann Rottenhammer painted in oil on panel one of his several versions of Mars, Venus and Vulcan (London, Hampton Court Palace) [Fig. 5.3]. Born in Munich in 1564, Rottenhammer spent a large part of his career in Italy, especially in Venice, where he worked with the most prominent artists.¹⁵ His picture shows some familiar elements: Mars and Venus lie naked in a canopy bed, intimately involved in their *delictum flagrans*, while Mars's weapons, helmet and cuirass lie on the floor. Vulcan comes rushing in from the left, ready to throw the (quite visible) net over the two lovers. Venus and Mars do not seem to notice anything (yet), even though Vulcan is already at the edge of their bed and his wooden leg must have made enough noise to startle them. This wooden leg makes it more than clear that Vulcan is lame, causing him to walk in a wobbly way that will make (informed) observers laugh, just as Homer describes how 'a fit of helpless laughter seized the happy gods as they watched Vulcan bustling up and down'.¹⁶ The plain, unwieldy shape of Vulcan's wooden leg forms a poignant contrast to the beautifully carved wooden legs of the bed and the column of the canopy. Under the bed, an *amorino* hurriedly saves Mars's helmet and sword from the onrushing Vulcan, afraid that the god who is famous for making beautiful suits of armor may damage Mars's military outfit.

14 Borghini Raffaello, *Il Riposo in cui della pittura e della scultura si favella* (Florence, Giorgio Marescotti: 1584) 60.

15 Good information on the painting and its painter can be found on the website of Hampton Court Palace: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/402726/venus-mars-and-vulcan>.

16 One of the better-known sources describing Vulcan as lame is Homer, *Iliad* XVIII, 394–409. Homer mentions the gods' laughter at his wobbly way of walking in *Iliad* I, 599–600 (here quoted after the 1950 translation by E. V. Rieu in the *Penguin Classics* series). Ovid describes Venus jeering at Vulcan's limp in *Ars amatoria* II, 567–68.

FIGURE 5.3 Johann Rottenhammer, *Mars, Venus and Vulcan*, 1604. Oil on panel, 29 × 46 cm
 London, Hampton Court Palace. Royal Collection Trust
 © HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II 2019

Unlike Enea Vico and Gian Giacomo Caraglio, Johann Rottenhammer did not create a *kontinuierende Darstellung*, but represented only one episode. This forced him to abandon illustrating Ovid's text to the letter. Since it would have been impossible to depict that Vulcan had spun an imperceptible web over the bed in advance, Rottenhammer instead shows him throwing a net over the two adulterers while they seem too *flagranter* occupied to notice him. Details such as Vulcan's wooden leg, the reference to Homer's text and the *amorino* hiding under the bed, express the witty spirit of Ovid's tale.

A more or less similar approach was followed by Paris Bordone, in a painting from c. 1548–1550 that is now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin [Fig. 5.4].¹⁷ He too shows the onrushing Vulcan – who now seems a surprisingly capable walker – ready to fling a visible net over the two lovers. This time, however, they have noticed him, and Mars hastily throws some cover over Venus. An *amorino* escapes from the scene, abandoning Mars's weapons at the foot of the tree trunk. The turbulence of the event is 'reflected' in the stormy clouds, between which the various gods can be seen watching the goings-on. The most remarkable

¹⁷ Canova G., *Paris Bordone* (Venice: 1964) 38–43 and 76–77; Larcher Crosato L, "Le origini grafiche di un gruppo di dipinti del Bordone", in *Paris Bordone e il suo tempo. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Treviso 20–30 ottobre 1985* (Treviso: 1987) 65–69.

FIGURE 5.4 Paris Bordone, *Mars, Venus and Vulcan*, c. 1548–1550. Oil on canvas, 168 × 198 cm Berlin, gemäldegalerie (ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN)

feature of this rendition is that it takes place in the open air. This may have been done to make it match its counterpart, a painting also showing (an event that led to) adultery: the biblical King David spying on Bathsheba while she takes a bath (Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) [Fig. 5.5].¹⁸ Even though the text in 2 *Samuel* 11 does not explicitly say so, it suggests that Bathsheba was bathing in the open air, and in this way she has traditionally been represented. Perhaps in order to make the two paintings harmonize, Paris Bordone also situated the adultery of Venus and Mars under the blue sky, even though this goes counter to the text of Ovid and ignores the cleverness of Vulcan's device to

18 There is good factual information on the website of 'Kulturelles Erbe Köln': <https://www.kulturelles-erbe-koeln.de/documents/obj/05010983>. Also useful is the entry on Paris Bordone on the website 'Cavallini to Veronese': https://cavallinitoveronese.co.uk/general/view_artist/78. Both the *Mars and Venus* and the *Bathsheba and David* painting were commissioned by Carlo da Rho, member of a prominent family in Milan.

FIGURE 5.5
Paris Bordone, *King David spying on Bathsheba while she takes a bath*, c. 1548–1550. Oil on canvas, 234 × 217 cm
Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum
(ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN)

FIGURE 5.6
Gian Giacomo Caraglio, *The wedding night of Alexander the Great and Roxana*, c. 1520–1539. Engraving, 22.5 × 31.3 cm
(Bartsch XV, 95, NO. 62.) London, British Museum
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catch the two adulterers.¹⁹ Perhaps the outdoor scenery can also be explained by the influence of another category of *Mars and Venus* paintings, in which the two lovers were likewise situated in a landscape setting, as we will see later on. Underlying all these representations, however, there may be a tradition going back to Roman and Greek antiquity, of descriptions and artworks presenting women or nymphs more or less nude in the open air.²⁰ Particularly relevant seems a passage in Giovanni Pontano's *Eridanus* (1, i, 17–56), a collection of elegiac poems written mainly in the 1490's.²¹ It relates how Venus makes Mars excited, as he spies on her while she dries herself after a bath in the Eridanus river and binds up her hair:

Prodit ab insidiis iuvenis prensatque paventem,
 implicat et cupida candida colla manu;
 (...)
 [Illa] oscula nunc offert, nunc aversatur amantem
 et miscet blandis tristia verba iocis.
 Ad votum properabat amans. Strepere salicta
 proxima, sollicitum qua movet aura nemus:
 expavere simul, simul et latuisse volebant,
 sed nec quo fugiant quove tegantur habent.
 Ipse deos miserans atram de gurgire nubem
 obicis et latebris abdis, opace, tuis.
 Illic securo venere ad gaudia cursu,
 mille modos matri dulce retexit Amor.
 Dic, Mars, dic, Gradive, potens ubi cuspis, ubi hasta?
 Scit Venus; ad ripas illa relictæ iacent,
 ilia puer Veneris tractat ridetque; sed ipse
 in Veneris mavis bella movere sinu.
 Bella move, nunc, dive, sapis, nunc consere pugnas;
 hostis adest, tamen est praeposuisse torum
 deliciasque tori molles placidamque quietem
 et dominae in tenero molle cubare sinu.

- 19 Cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 8, 329–32 (after the 1946 translation by E. V. Rieu in the *Penguin Classics* series): 'See how our slow moving Hephaestus (*i.e.* Vulcan) has caught Ares (*i.e.* Mars), though no god on Olympus can run as fast. Hephaestus may be lame, but his craft has won the day.'
- 20 Baert B., "The Sleeping Nymph Revisited: Ekphrasis, Genius Loci and Silence", in Enenkel K. A. E. – Traninger A. (eds), *The Figure of the Nymph in Early Modern Culture*, *Intersections* 54 (Leiden – Boston: 2018) 149–176.
- 21 Roman L., *Giovanni Gioviano Pontano. On Married Love; Eridanus*, 1 Tatti Renaissance Library 63 (Cambridge MA: 2014) xi–xii.

... The young god [sc. Mars] charged in ambush,
 seized the terrified goddess, and enlaced
 his ardent arms around her lovely neck ...
 (...)

 She offered kisses now, now from her lover shrank,
 and with flirtatious jests mixed angry words.
 The lover pressed on towards his goal. The willow hedge
 rustled nearby where the agitated grove
 was moved by breeze. They froze with fear and wished to hide,
 But lacked a place to flee or be concealed.
 You [sc. Eridanus] pitied them, and sent up from your waters' depths
 a dark mist, and concealed them, shady river,
 within your hiding places. There they made their way
 unto love's pleasures by a carefree course,
 and Love agreeably revealed a thousand modes
 of passion to his mother. Tell me, Mars,
 tell me, Gradivus: where is your mighty javelin
 and where your spear? Venus knows: they lie
 abandoned on the river bank, and Venus' boy
 is handling them, and laughing. But you, Mars,
 in Venus' lap prefer to fight your skirmishes.
 Do battle, *now*, O god – for you know how –
 and *now* trade blow for blow. The enemy awaits,
 and yet it is permissible to prefer
 the bed and the luxurious pleasures of the bed,
 soothing tranquility, and to lie down
 sensuously in one's mistress' delicate embrace.²²

These lines further indicate that the tradition of a (nude) woman in a landscape could be combined with the story of the love affair of Mars and Venus, and that it was not considered problematic if it departed from Ovid's text.

Pontano's poem contains another interesting feature that we have seen depicted in all the pictures discussed so far, although it is not mentioned by Ovid: the weapons and cuirass which Mars has laid down (and Cupid has taken away), so that now, on the battlefield of love, he must resort to another weapon to show what he is worth. Pontano and the painters may ultimately have derived this feature from an *ekphrasis* in the *Herodotus or Aëtion* by the Greek author Lucian (c. 125–after 180). It describes a picture by the Greek painter

22 *Eridanus* I, i, 33–34, 39–57, quoted after the edition and translation of Luke Roman, *Giovanni Gioviano Pontano*, 160–163.

Aëtion (c. 350 BCE?) depicting the wedding night of Alexander the Great and Roxana, which includes a detail of *amorini* running off with Alexander's arms:

On the other side of the picture are more Cupids playing among Alexander's armour; two of them are carrying his spear, pretending to be labourers burdened under a beam; two others are dragging a third, their king no doubt, on the shield, holding it by the handgrips; another has gone inside the corslet, which is lying breast-up on the ground – he seems to be lying in ambush to frighten the others when they drag the shield past him. All this is not needless triviality and a waste of labour. Aëtion is calling attention to Alexander's other love – War –, implying that in his love of Roxana he did not forget his armour.²³

Around 1515, the great painter Raphael attempted a 'reconstruction' of this lost painting. The resulting drawing (now in Vienna, Albertina) was subsequently engraved by Gian Giacomo Caraglio, between 1520–1539 [Fig. 5.6].²⁴ Thus, 16th century artists who did not know the text of Lucian's *ekphrasis* could still be familiar with the detail of the weapons and cuirass laid down by the martial hero and taken away by *amorini*.

Both the feature of lovers in a landscape and *amorini* running off with Mars's arms, are included in Sandro Botticelli's painting of Mars and Venus from c. 1485 (London, National Gallery) [Fig. 5.7]²⁵ and one by Piero di Cosimo from c. 1505 (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie) [Fig. 5.8].²⁶ It is hard to say if the painter(s)

23 Quoted after the 1959 translation by K. Kilburn in volume 1 of the edition of Lucian's work in the *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge MA: 1967) 147–149. For information on the Greek painter Aëtion, see Pollitt J. J., *The Art of Ancient Greece: Sources and Documents* (Cambridge: 1990²) 175. For an overview of Latin translations of Lucian's work during the 15th and 16th centuries, see Deligiannis F., "Production et diffusion des traductions latines de Lucien à la période de la fin du manuscrit et des débuts de l'imprimé (fin xve siècle–fin xvie siècle)", *Astérion. Philosophie, histoire des idées, pensée politique* 16 (2017) DOI: 10.4000/asterion.2896 <https://journals.openedition.org/asterion/2896>.

24 Bartsch, *Peintre Graveur* xv, 95, no. 62. For information on this print, see the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1457352&partId=1&searchText=Caraglio&page=1.

25 For information on this painting, see the website of the National Gallery in London: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/sandro-botticelli-venus-and-mars>.

26 For information on this painting, see the website of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin: <http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=865206&viewType=detailView>.

FIGURE 5.7 Sandro Botticelli, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1485. Oil and tempera on wood, 69 × 173 cm, London, National Gallery
© THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

FIGURE 5.8 Piero di Cosimo, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1505. Oil on wood, 72 × 182 cm. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie
(ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN)

influenced Giovanni Pontano or *vice versa*, but it is clear that before 1500 written and visual traditions had already merged in presenting the two Olympian lovers in an outdoor scenery, whereby Mars has taken off his suit of armor.

Pontano's elegy and the paintings by Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo have another feature in common: the absence of Vulcan. Paris Bordone's painting demonstrates the awkward result of combining the tradition of Mars and Venus fornicating in full nature with Ovid's story of Vulcan trapping them in his invisible net. Moreover, as we have seen, representing the episode of Vulcan catching the adulterous couple along Ovidian lines in one single picture was already difficult to start with. Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo therefore dropped the jealous husband and fantasized about what happened when Mars and Venus were together undisturbed – something that Ovid left his readers guessing about.

FIGURE 5.9 Palma Giovane (Jacopo di Antonio Negretti), *Mars and Venus*, c. 1590. Oil on canvas, 133 × 168 cm. London, National Gallery. Presented by the Duke of Northumberland, 1838

© THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

Picturing how Mars and Venus spent their time together before Vulcan became aware of their adultery is the theme of two paintings by Palma Giovane (Jacopo di Antonio Negretti). The tumultuous love affair in the version from around 1590 (London, National Gallery) does not need much explanation [Fig. 5.9].²⁷ Likewise does the virtuoso way of rendering flesh and textures, and showing Mars in a sharply foreshortened way speak for itself. A few details, however, must be pointed out: Mars's helmet and suit of armor on the floor, and the *amorino* taking off Mars's shoe. This latter feature is a subtle variation on Lucian's *ekphrasis* of Aetion's painting, where Alexander the Great is in charge and fully prepared to start the amorous battle with the shy Roxana: 'There are smiling Cupids: one is standing behind her removing the veil from her head and showing Roxana to her husband; another like a true servant is taking the sandal off her foot, already preparing her for bed ...'²⁸ In Palma's

27 For information on this painting, see the website of the National Gallery in London: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/palma-giovane-mars-and-venus>.

28 See above, n. 23.

FIGURE 5.10 Palma Giovane (Jacopo di Antonio Negretti), *Mars and Venus*, c. 1605–1609. Oil on canvas, 143 × 205 cm. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum
DIGITAL IMAGE COURTESY OF THE GETTY'S OPEN CONTENT PROGRAM

painting, the battlefield of love is clearly dominated by Venus and it is Mars who, like the shy Roxana, needs the help of an *amorino*. Next to the *amorino*'s right leg are two turtle doves, whose symbolic meaning as lovebirds is obvious.

Palma Giovane's second version of *Mars and Venus*, from about 1605–1609, shows a number of the same features (Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum) [Fig. 5.10].²⁹ This time, however, the two lovers are not yet involved in amorous action, but seem to be meeting each other for the first time in a naked state. A servant at the left has pulled back the curtain of the canopy of Venus's bed, revealing her nude to Mars. A maid at the right is fluffing up the pillows, and in the back a girl comes walking in to serve drinks. Venus seems quite prepared and comfortable without clothes, but Mars is still in the process of being undressed and reacts as if he is taken by surprise. His gestures, in particular the way in which he stretches out his arms, resemble those of Actaeon in Titian's painting from 1556–1559, *Diana seen nude by Actaeon* (Edinburgh. National

29 For information on this painting, see the website of the J. Paul Getty Museum: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/596/palma-il-giovane-venus-and-mars-italian-about-1605-1609/>.

FIGURE 5.11 Titian, *Diana seen nude by Actaeon*, 1556–59. Oil on canvas, 184 × 202 cm. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland. Bought jointly by the National Gallery and National Galleries of Scotland with contributions from the Scottish Government, the National Heritage Memorial Fund, The Monument Trust, The Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation), Artemis Investment Management Ltd, Binks Trust, Mr Busson on behalf of the EIM Group, Dunard Fund, The Fuserna Foundation, Gordon Getty, The Hintze Family Charitable Foundation, J Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Trust, John Dodd, Northwood Charitable Trust, The Rothschild Foundation, Sir Siegmund Warburg's Voluntary Settlement and through public appeal, 2009
© THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

Gallery of Scotland) [Fig. 5.11].³⁰ Indeed, Palma's painting looks like a clever, humorous reversal of numerous elements in Titian's canvas: contrary to Titian's Diana, Venus is not at all shy to show her nudity, and her servants do not try

³⁰ For information on this painting, see the website of the National Galleries of Scotland: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/8685/diana-and-actaeon>.

to cover her, but reveal her. Unlike Actaeon, Mars is not startled to see Venus nude, but is taken aback because he himself is not ready to be seen naked.

Comparable fantasies, visualizing what is left untold by Ovid, are the theme of several works by Lambert Sustris, who seems to have taken particular pleasure in the tale of Mars and Venus. Sustris was originally Dutch, but spent most of his career in Venice, often working for or together with Titian.³¹ A painting from c. 1560 (Paris, Louvre) [Fig. 5.12] shows Venus lying nude on a couch,³² as a variation on or derivation of similar paintings by Titian, such as the so-called *Venus of Urbino* from 1538 (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi) or *Danae* (c. 1544–45: Naples, Museo di Capodimonte; 1549–50: Madrid, Prado) [Fig. 5.13].³³ Sustris has cleverly combined this tradition of showing a nude woman lying on a bed or couch with the myth of Venus and Mars. His painting shows Venus talking to her son Cupid, who quite suggestively points his arrow towards her, as she pets two doves involved in even more insinuating behavior. In the background at the right, Mars can be seen fully armed, making his way towards her. He seems to be sneaking away from a garden party, where Venus may also have slipped out, hoping that the partying couples are too busily occupied with each other to notice the disappearance of the two Olympian lovers.³⁴ In an earlier work from c. 1550 (St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum) [Fig. 5.14], Lambert Sustris has painted the same theme with a slight variation.³⁵ Strongly reminiscent of Titian's various paintings showing Venus lying nude on a bed against the background of a landscape, Sustris's canvas presents the goddess of love holding only one dove in her hand. In the rural background Mars is on his way. He seems ready for action, as he is almost completely nude, except for his helmet.

31 For information on this artist, see the website of the RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History: <https://rkd.nl/en/explore/artists/76101>.

32 For information on this painting, see the website of the Louvre in Paris: http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=22906.

33 For information on the *Venus of Urbino* and the *Danae* in Madrid, see the websites of respectively the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence and the Prado in Madrid: <https://www.visituffizi.org/artworks/venus-of-urbino-by-titian/> and <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/danae-and-the-shower-of-gold/0da1e69e-4d1d-4f25-b41a-bac3c0eb6a3c>. For the *Danae* in Naples, see Alabiso A. C., *La Danae di Tiziano del Museo di Capodimonte. Il mito, la storia, il restauro* (Naples: 2005).

34 Lambert's son Frederik Sustris seems to have freely copied the left part of the painting and turned it into a separate print, that shows just Venus and Cupid (c. 1560–1580); see the information on the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.british-museum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3305301&partId=1&searchText=sustris&page=1.

35 Heinze, A., *Der Liegende Weibliche Akt in Malerei Und Graphik Der Renaissance*, Studien zur internationalen Architektur- und Kunstgeschichte 142 (Petersberg: 2016) 85–193, esp. 159–60.

FIGURE 5.12 Lambert Sustris, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1560. Oil on canvas, 132 × 184 cm. Paris, Louvre
(ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN)

FIGURE 5.13 Titian, *Danae*, c. 1544–45. Oil on canvas, 149 × 202 cm. Naples, Museo di Capodimonte
(ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN)

FIGURE 5.14 Lambert Sustris, *Venus and Mars*, c. 1550. Oil on canvas, 101.5 × 170.5 cm.
St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum
(ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN)

In his urge to see Venus, however, he looks like he got lost. Cupid, quite likely sent by his impatient mother, points him in the right direction.

In a third painting by Lambert Sustris, also from around 1550 (Munich, Alte Pinakothek) [Fig. 5.15], Mars has arrived at Venus's house, but comes at an embarrassing moment.³⁶ He is seen in the background, entering through Vulcan's forge (an anvil stands nearby) and talking to a girl with a spindle sitting near a loom, who is probably Venus's servant keeping a look-out. She seems taken aback, as Mars arrives just as the old cripple Vulcan has entered the bedroom to get intimate with his beautiful young wife. Thrown down onto the floor lies a hammer instead of a suit of armor. Beside it are Cupid's bow and arrows, idly lying around as there seems to be no point in using them on Vulcan. Cupid himself is somewhat awkwardly positioned between Venus and Vulcan, obstructing rather than stimulating their enjoyment of each other. The dog on the floor in the foreground seems unaware of both the visitor arriving and the unusual activities his master is engaging in: undisturbed it sleeps on. Venus, however, throws a meaningful glance to the observers of the painting,

³⁶ For information on this painting, see the website of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, <https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/de/artist/lambert-sustris/venus-und-vulkan-von-mars-belauscht>.

FIGURE 5.15 Lambert Sustris, *Venus and Vulcan*, c. 1550. Oil on canvas, 170 × 252 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

PHOTO: BAYERISCHE STAATSGEMÄLDESAMMLUNGEN – ALTE PINAKOTHEK MÜNCHEN (INV.-NR. 2408)

who can perfectly see and understand what is going on, making them complicit in her secret love affair with Mars.

Poking fun at the cuckolded old Vulcan is also the point of a contemporaneous painting by Jacopo Tintoretto, from c. 1550–1555 (Florence, Palazzo Pitti) [Fig. 5.16].³⁷ It shows Venus, reminiscent of Titian's nude women, lying on a canopy bed against the backdrop of a landscape. However, she is now represented in her role as mother, holding in her right arm her little son Cupid against her bosom and keeping in her left hand a quiver with arrows. Also present is bald old Vulcan, sitting on his knees on the bed and gently stroking Cupid's hair, as if he were his father. This conduct indicates that he truly believes Cupid is his son. He is not aware that in the sky in the background the more likely father is arriving in a chariot drawn by wolves: Mars.³⁸ So not only

37 Echols R. – Ilchman F., *Tintoretto 1519–1594*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Art (U.S.), Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Palazzo Ducale di Venezia (Venice: 2018) 248.

38 Sgarbi V. – Morello G., *Tintoretto* (Milan: 2012) 148, think that Mars is fleeing instead of arriving unexpectedly. Also Echols – Ilchman, *Tintoretto* 248, think that Mars is riding off, but as the chariot is coming down, not taking off, this is quite unlikely – even more so considering the similarity with the motif of Mars arriving in Sustris's painting in Munich. Alberti, “Divine Cuckolds” 164, identifies the figure in the chariot as Apollo. However,

FIGURE 5.16 Jacopo Tintoretto, *Venus, Vulcan and Cupid*, c. 1550–55. Oil on canvas, 85 × 197 cm. Florence, Palazzo Pitti
ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN. PHOTO: GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI, FLORENCE (INV.-NR. 00294820)

is old Vulcan living in a state of illusion about his parenthood, he is still being cuckolded by the real father of his wife's son.

The theme of a family composed of a child, his mother and an old man seemingly his father, is a familiar one: Christ, Mary and Joseph, together forming the Holy Family, belong to the most represented example of that theme. Joseph was traditionally portrayed as an old man, so as to make it clear that he could not possibly be the father of Christ. Thus he gradually became an object of ridicule and was increasingly represented as an old simpleton.³⁹ In the later years of the 16th century the Church put an end to this kind of irreverence, spurred on by the rise of Protestantism. When Jacopo Tintoretto painted his *Venus, Vulcan and Cupid*, he may certainly have intended an undertone referring to pictures of the Holy Family, even though it is hard to prove this definitely or to come up with one picture he referred to in particular. A painting of *The Rest on the Flight to Egypt* by Fra Bartolomeo from c. 1500 (Pienza, Palazzo

Apollo's chariot is traditionally drawn by horses, not wolves, and he is usually surrounded by sun rays. Moreover, Apollo normally does not wear a helmet, as the figure in the painting does. (Due to the present frame, Mars's head can no longer be seen, but on older photographs it is well visible.) Alberti's explanation of the arrival of Apollo as 'a presage of the future development of the story and a reminder, to the viewer, that Vulcan is about to have an unpleasant surprise', does not make much sense.

39 Alberti, 'Divine Cuckolds', 149–162; Williams A. L., "Satirizing the Sacred: Humor in Saint Joseph's Veneration and Early Modern Art", *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 10.1 (2018), DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2018.10.1.3: <https://jhna.org/articles/satirizing-sacred-humor-saint-josephs-veneration-early-modern-art/>.

FIGURE 5.17 Fra Bartolomeo, *The Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, c. 1500. Oil and tempera on canvas, 135 × 114 cm. Pienza, Palazzo Borgia Museo Diocesano
(ARTWORK IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN)

Borgia Museo Diocesano) [Fig. 5.17], however, offers a good parallel.⁴⁰ Mary holds her little son to her bosom, while bald old Joseph sits on his knees, adoring Him. It may be no coincidence that Joseph's counterpart in the painting is an ass.

It was not only Vulcan, though, who was made to look ridiculous: Mars was also made a fool of, or at least represented foolishly. We have seen how he kept

⁴⁰ For information on this painting, see the website of the Palazzo Borgia Museo Diocesano in Pienza: <http://palazzoborgia.it/museo/> as well as <http://casavacanze.poderesantapia.com/album/valdorcia/pienzapalazzoborgiamuseodiocesano4.htm>.

FIGURE 5.18 Paolo Veronese, *Mars and Venus surprised by Cupid*, c. 1565–1570. Oil on canvas, 47 × 47 cm. Turin, Galleria Sabauda. From: *Veronese: Gods, Heroes and Allegories*, exh cat. Musée du Luxembourg and Museo Correr (Milan: 2004), 139

his helmet on, as if this is an adulterer's way of having safe sex, and that he required the help of Cupid to get him going on the battlefield of love. In a painting from c. 1565–1570 (Turin, Galleria Sabauda) [Fig. 5.18], Paolo Veronese – who was mainly active in the Veneto, just as the other painters discussed so far – shows how the Olympic couple are indiscreetly interrupted at the moment when Mars pushes Venus down on the bed.⁴¹ They hold each other in a sort

41 For extensive information on this painting, see the entry on the website of the Italian Beni Culturali, by Garavelli N. – Accornero C., “Opera d'arte ‘Marte e Venere con Cupido’ di Caliori Paolo detto Paolo Veronese (1528/ 1588), a Torino”, <https://www.beni-culturali>

of dancing position and Mars as usual has put his suit of armor on the floor. The indelicate intruder is Venus's son Cupid, who comes walking down the spiral staircase into their bedroom while leading a horse, which sticks its head around the doorpost and stares at the interrupted lovers quite sheepishly (if that is the right word to use in connection to a horse). The absurdity of the scene is further raised by the fact that Cupid is not carrying his typical quiver or bow and arrows, but holding a large bridle to keep the horse under control. Thus it is, ironically, the little god of erotic pleasure who warns his mother, goddess of love, and her martial suitor against unbridled passion.⁴²

In a print by Léon Davent from c. 1545–1550, after a composition by Gianfrancesco Penni or Primaticcio, Mars is certainly the fool of the story [Fig. 5.19].⁴³ Cupid has led Venus to the bed of the war god, who seems fully prepared to meet his mistress, as he has already taken off his suit of armor and put it, as usual, on the ground. Venus, adopting the lust evoking pose of Praxiteles's *pudica* statue in Cnidos,⁴⁴ pulls away the drape of the canopy, only to find Mars deep asleep. In disappointed surprise she stares at her drained suitor, who seems hardly more enjoyable than her impotent old husband.

Some prints by Giovanni Battista Scultori from around 1540 hint at the interruption and discovery of Mars's love affair with Venus, not through fantasizing in response to Ovid's tale, but through the help of another text. An engraving

.eu/opere_d_arte/scheda/-marte-e-venere-con-cupido-caliari-paolo-detto-paolo-veronese-1528-1588-01-00217088/322260.

- 42 The bridle as an (obvious) symbol of reining in unbridled passion, is described in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* from 1593 (Rome, Lepidus Facius) 480, as an attribute of *Temperanza*: '[La temperanza] dipingesi col freno in una mano, e col tempo nell'altra, per dimostrare l'offitio della temperanza, che è di refrenare, e moderare gl'appetiti dell'animo, secondo i tempi, significandosi anco per lo tempo la misura del moto, e della quiete, perche con la temperanza si misurano i movimenti dell'animo, e si danno i termini dell'una, e dall'altra banda, da quali uscendo la temperanza, si guasta come i fiumi, che vanno fuori delle sponde loro.' The shortened translation of the English edition (*Iconologia, or, Moral emblems* (London, Pierce Tempest: 1709) 73) reads: 'Bridle and Stay denote the Business of Temperance to bridle and moderate the Appetite and inordinate Passions, as time serves.' Richard Cocke, "Wit and Humour in the Work of Paolo Veronese", *Artibus et Historiae* 11.21 (1990) 125–145, esp. 139, ignores the bridle and interprets (incorrectly, in my view) the entrance of Cupid and the horse as a 'call to arms' which 'conquers love, or perhaps better lust.'
- 43 Bartsch, *Peintre Graveur* xvi, 399, no. 61; for detailed information, see the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1417995&partId=1&searchText=mars+venus+&page=2.
- 44 See above, n. 10.

FIGURE 5.19 Léon Davent, after Gianfrancesco Penni or Francesco Primaticcio, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1545–1550. Engraving, 29.9 × 27.6 cm. (Bartsch xvi, 399, no. 61.) London, British Museum
© TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

from 1539 shows Mars helmeted and in full armor sitting on a canopy bed, with Venus totally naked next to him [Fig. 5.20].⁴⁵ She holds Cupid to her bosom, either to breastfeed him at this special moment, or as the usual attribute that

45 Bartsch, *Peintre Graveur* xv, 381, no. 13; the date of 1539 is engraved in the sun, in the top right corner of the print. For detailed information, see the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1613418&partId=1&searchText=scultori&page=2.

FIGURE 5.20 Giovanni Battista Scultori, *Mars, Venus and Gallus*, 1539. Engraving, 28.3 × 20.5 cm. (Bartsch xv, 381, no. 13.) London, British Museum
© TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

makes her recognizable as Venus.⁴⁶ Through the window behind them bright rays of light shine and on the windowsill sits a strange creature with bird's legs and a crest on its helmet. This identifies it as Gallus or Alectryon. According to a second text by Lucian – not *Herodotus* but *The Dream or the Cock* – Mars's servant Gallus (in Greek: Alectryon) had to stand guard at the door while Mars was in Venus's room. The one time when Gallus fell asleep, however, Apollo detected the adulterous lovers and betrayed their affair to Vulcan. To punish Gallus, Mars changed him, armor and all, into a bird, which still has the crest of a helmet on its head and crows when it sees the sun rising. This bird has kept the name 'Gallus': cock.⁴⁷ Scultori's print hints at trouble to come not only via Gallus, but also through the attributes on the floor in front of the bed: Venus's slippers indicating a secret affair (just as in the print by Enea Vico), two turtle doves (as in the Sustris painting in Paris and the one by Palma Giovane in London) and a cat and dog provoking each other, probably referring to Mars and either the cuckolded Vulcan or the jealous Apollo.⁴⁸ In a print from around the same time, c. 1540, Scultori once more illustrated the episode [Fig. 5.21], this time basing himself on Raphael's painting of *Isaac and Rebecca Spied on by*

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- 46 Cupid appears in a similarly confusing way as an attribute of Venus in one of Perino del Vaga's *Cupid and Psyche* paintings in Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome (1545–1546); see De Jong J. L., "Il pittore a le volte è puro poeta'. Cupid and Psyche in Italian Renaissance Painting", in Zimmerman M. (ed.), *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass, volume II: Cupid and Psyche* (Groningen: 1998) 189–215, at 194.
- 47 Lucian, *The Dream or the Cock* 3. This text had already been translated into Latin by Rudolph Agricola in 1484, and it was published in 1530 (Strasbourg, Christian Egenolff) – see Deligiannis, "Production et diffusion des traductions latines de Lucien" § 13 and n. 78.
- 48 The figure of Gallus metamorphosed into a cock has often been misidentified, also in recent studies; see Jong J. L. de, "Love, Betrayal and Corruption. Mars and Venus, and Danae and Jupiter in the Palazzi Stati-Cenci and Mattei di Paganica in Rome", *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 19.1 (1999) 20–29, esp. 28–29 n.29. One of the few to identify the figure correctly is Cieri Via, "Venere, Vulcano e Marte" 358–59. Scultori's print was copied in reverse by Enea Vico (Bartsch, *Peintre Graveur* xv, 292, no. 21), with an explanatory inscription that does not mention Gallus. Around 1550–1560, Scultori's print served as the example for a fresco painting of Mars, Venus and Gallus in Palazzo Mattei di Paganica in Rome; see De Jong, *ibid.* Either Giovanni Battista Scultori or Giovanni Battista Ghisi made a somewhat simplified version of the print (it is not clear when exactly), with just Mars and Venus embracing each other and without Gallus: Bartsch, *Peintre Graveur* xv, 379, no. 7. See the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1493559&partId=1&searchText=mars+venus&page=1.

FIGURE 5.21 Giovanni Battista Scultori, *Mars, Venus and Gallus*, c. 1540. Engraving, 21 × 23 cm. London, British Museum

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Abimelech from 1518–1519, in the second Vatican loggia [Fig. 5.22].⁴⁹ The result is a reversed and more explicit picture than Raphael's painting. Mars is still fully armored while Venus is completely nude. Cupid seems to have fallen asleep on the bed, his quiver and bow standing idly on the floor in front of the bed. The window, through which the sun is seen rising in Raphael's painting, offers a view

49 For detailed information, see the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1466915&partId=1&searchText=scultori&page=1. For Raphael's painting, see Pietrangeli C. (ed.), *Paintings in the Vatican* (Boston: 1996) 371. I am not aware of any 16th century prints made after this painting. It served not only as an example to Scultori, but also to Nicolò da Urbino, when around 1525 he painted a set of 22 maiolica plates for Eleonora Gonzaga, duchess of Urbino, which she had commissioned as a gift to her mother Isabella d'Este. The maiolica plate showing *Abimelech Spying on Isaac and Rebecca* is now in the Louvre, Paris; see the website of the Louvre, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/plate-abimelech-spying-isaac-and-rebecca-coat-arms-isabella-d-este-gonzaga-marchiones> and http://www.godot.fr/musvirtuel_renaissance.htm. Talvacchia, *Taking Positions* 132–33, has clearly not recognized Raphael's painting as the source of Scultori's print and erroneously describes the print as 'a pastiche by an artist in Giulio [Romano]'s Mantuan circle who composed it with the help of appropriations taken from *I modi*, other examples of Giulio's treatment of the loves of the gods, and at least one other of Giulio's allegorical drawings.'

FIGURE 5.22 Raphael, *Isaac and Rebecca spied upon by Abimelech*, c. 1518–19. Fresco. Rome, Vatican palace, loggia, bay 5. From: C. Pietrangelo (ed.) *Paintings in the Vatican* (Boston: 1996) 371

on the sun god Apollo driving his chariot through the sky. Gallus, meanwhile, forsakes his duty and has already been metamorphosed in his sleep.

An engraving by Giulio Bonasone from around the same time – part of the print series ‘The Loves of the Gods’ – also shows Mars and Venus, with Apollo in his chariot in the sky [Fig. 5.23].⁵⁰ The two lovers are now both nude and there is no Gallus, just Apollo, who seems to be driving his chariot with horses and all through the window into the room. The often included attributes such as slippers, doves, suit of armor and Cupid are lacking, and the composition misses the visual ingenuity and humor we have seen in the paintings and

⁵⁰ Bartsch, *Peintre Graveur* xv, 152, no. 162. For detailed information, see the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3030408&partId=1&searchText=mars+venus+&page=1. For the ‘Loves of the Gods’ series, see Turner J. G., “Caraglio’s ‘Loves of the Gods’”, *Print Quarterly* 24.4 (2007) 359–380.

FIGURE 5.23 Giulio Bonasone, *Mars and Venus discovered by Apollo*, c. 1535. Engraving, 16.5 × 11 cm. (Bartsch XV, 152, no. 162.) London, British Museum
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prints discussed so far. Instead of visual devices, the artist resorted to words to give his picture an extra 'layer' of meaning. Where Mars's suit of armor would normally be laying on the floor, there is now an inscription recording the words that Venus says upon noticing Apollo in the sky: 'You have betrayed me to my old Vulcan, | Jealous Apollo, I will give you this punishment, | that you will go after beautiful Daphne in vain.' ('Tu m'hai scoperto al vecchio mio Volcano | Invido Apollo io ti daro castigo | Che seguirai la bella Daphne in vano.')51 Several other prints of Bonasone's 'Loves of the Gods' series have similar lines in *terza rime*, but in the case of the Mars and Venus print they do not add much to the picture.

3 Adding a Moral Dimension

A print attributed to Matthias Greuter after a design by Raffaellino da Reggio, from around 1600, includes an inscription that helps detect a moral lesson in the frivolous tale of Mars and Venus's flagrant escapades [Fig. 5.24].⁵² The picture shows Venus half nude, lying seductively in bed. An *amorino* with a burning torch pulls away the curtains of the canopy, revealing her to Mars, who starts undressing himself. In a niche behind the bed stands a statue of a man with a torch, who represents Hymen or Hymenaeus, the god of marriage,⁵³ indicating that this is Venus's wedding bed, in which she should sleep with her husband Vulcan, not Mars. The war god, however, has already thrown his helmet, sword and shield on the floor and looking eagerly at his lover waiting for him, starts taking off his suit of armor. At this point, the text at the bottom of the print comes in with a moralizing warning:

Cede marte al valor di pargoletto
fanciullo ignudo, poiche fiero ardore
mentre l'armi depon gli strugge il petto.

51 The myth of Apollo and Daphne is told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 1, 452–567.

52 For detailed information, see the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3203660&partId=1&searchText=Raffaellino+da+Reggio+&page=1.

53 Cf. the following lines of Lucian's *ekphrasis* of the painting showing the wedding night of Alexander the Great and Roxana, quoted in n. 23: 'The king himself [sc. Alexander the Great] is holding out a garland to the maiden and their best man and helper, Hephaestion, is there with a blazing torch in his hand, leaning on a very handsome youth – I think he is Hymenaeus.'

FIGURE 5.24 Matthias Greuter after Raffaellino da Reggio, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1600.
Engraving, 44.8 × 31.7 cm. London, British Museum
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Dunque ignudo fanciul si dara vanto
 di far l'armi deporre al fiero marte
 e di condurlo a la sua madre a canto.

O quanto amor nostro intelletto adombra
 mentre lasciare ne fa laudaci imprese
 per un falso piacer chel petto ingombra.

Mars cedes to the power of little naked boy, because a strong passion
 overwhelms his spirit while he takes off his arms.

So naked little boy will pride himself for having made fiery Mars put
 down his arms and leading him away to his mother.

O how much does love darken our intellect while it makes us put aside
 laudable actions for a false pleasure that darkens the soul.

Greuter's print after Raffaellino da Reggio indicates that for 16th century observers the myth of Mars and Venus could contain a moralizing message. The various works discussed so far all seem to be attempts to represent Ovid's words in pictures and to rival the frivolous humor of his poetry with visual means. They do not contain clear clues as to whether the adulterous content of the tale was morally unwelcome or if it was considered to teach an edifying lesson, if only by showing how one should *not* behave. (Veronese's painting of *Mars and Venus interrupted by Cupid* may be an exception.) That does not mean, of course, that observers were precluded from seeing a moral lesson in it: they could always 'read' their own moral notions into a picture, even when these were not clearly indicated. The text on Greuter's print, however, explicitly warns the viewers for impetuous, passionate behavior, as displayed by Mars, at the cost of more praiseworthy deeds. It does not explicitly say anything about adultery.⁵⁴

All this is even more outspoken in a print from 1553, published by Hieronymus Cock [Fig. 5.25].⁵⁵ The print copies a lost monochrome painting

54 Greuter's print after Raffaellino da Reggio shows many similarities to a lost painting by Daniele da Volterra, illustrating *Mercury Appearing to Aeneas and Dido*, which expresses a comparable message: Aeneas is urged by Mercury to turn away from the seductions of Dido and pursue the path of Virtue. See De Jong J. L., "Dido in Italian Renaissance art. The Afterlife of a Tragic Heroine", *Artibus et Historiae* 59 (2009) 73–89, esp. 74–75.

55 For detailed information, see the website of the British Museum in London: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=428281001&objectId=3024358&partId=1.

FIGURE 5.25 Hieronymus Cock, after Baldassare Peruzzi, *Mars, Venus and Vulcan*, 1553. Engraving, 23.1 × 26 cm. London, British Museum
© TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

by Baldassare Peruzzi from around 1510, on the façade of the Villa Farnesina (originally Villa Chigi) in Rome.⁵⁶ The engraver did not reverse the copy in relation to the painting, which means that the print is a mirror image which must be read, quite unusually, from right to left. The picture is a *kontinuierende Darstellung*, just like the prints by Enea Vico and Gian Giacomo Caraglio, and illustrates most of the important episodes of the Mars and Venus tale. For those viewers who do not immediately recognize the story, a few lines taken from Ovid have been added at the bottom to explain what is going on: *In medijs ambo deprenti amplexibus herent. Turpiter, atque aliquis de Dis non tristibus, optat Sic fieri turpis*: 'They were held fast in the very act of embracing. A shameful sight; the gods were highly amused, one of them prayed that he too

56 Ziefer, "Marte e Venere sorpresi da Vulcano" 208–211.

might be so shamed.⁵⁷ Noteworthy in the picture is the presence of Neptune talking to Vulcan and negotiating the release of Mars, which is an episode not told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but hinted at in his version of the story in the *Ars Amatoria* and related extensively in Homer's *Illiad*.⁵⁸ On the other hand, the appearance of both male and female gods in the sky (Diana and Minerva can be seen, respectively, on the left and right) follows Ovid's text, whereas Homer tells that the goddesses, 'constrained by feminine modesty', did not want to come and watch the couple trapped *in flagranti*.⁵⁹ Even more so than in Greuter's print after Raffaellino da Reggio, the viewers are encouraged to heed the moral message implied in the tale, which is a warning against 'the lust of the flesh'.⁶⁰ In order to make this message clear, it is not a line of Ovid or Homer that is included in the print, but one of a more serious author. At the top, between Apollo in his chariot discovering Venus's infidelity and the gods laughing at the adulterous couple, a *putto* holds a tablet with the inscription: *Malorum esca, voluptas qua homines capiuntur ut hamo pisces*: 'Pleasure is the bait of sin through which men are caught like fish with a hook.' The author of this text is also indicated: Cicero. Not mentioned is the exact place of the line (*De Senectute* XIII, 44) and the fact that Cicero, through the mouth of Cato the Elder, refers to Plato as the actual source of it. In his *Timaeus* (69d) Plato calls pleasure 'the greatest incitement to evil'. In the preceding paragraphs Cicero argued – still through the mouth of Cato the Elder – that, '... there is nothing so hateful and so pernicious as pleasure, since, if indulged in too much and too long, it turns the light of the soul into utter darkness.'⁶¹ The relevance for the scene illustrated in the print is obvious: indulging in pleasure is the source of all kinds of evil. It is implied that it is this which leads to impetuous, passionate behavior and infidelity.⁶² (Just as in the Greuter print, adultery is not explicitly mentioned or censured.) To accentuate this message, a pensive Cupid is seen sitting on Mars's suit of armor on the ground, resting his head on his hand and staring at the viewers of the print with a meaningful glance.

57 *Metamorphoses* IV, 184 and 187–188.

58 Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* II, 587–588; Homer, *Illiad* VIII, 343–358.

59 Homer, *Odyssey* 8, 321–328; see also Ziefer, "Marte e Venere sorpresi da Vulcano" 208.

60 1 John 2:16.

61 'Nullam capitaliorem pestem quam voluptatem corporis hominibus dicebat a natura datam, cuius voluptatis avidae libidines temere et ecfrenate ad potiendum incitarentur' *De Senectute* XIII, 39–40, quoted after the translation of William Armistead Falconer, *De Senectute: De Amicitia; De Divinatione*, The Loeb Classical Library 154 (Cambridge MA.: 1923) 49. According to Cicero, these words were spoken by the Pythagorean philosopher Archytas of Tarentum (fl. c. 400 BCE).

62 See the interesting discussion in Uchacz, "Mars, Venus and Vulcan" 257–258.

4 Conclusion

After studying this selection of 16th century prints and paintings that were either made in Italy or based on Italian examples, it will be clear that attempts at a comprehensive and accurate illustration of Ovid's tale of Vulcan trapping Mars and Venus *in flagranti* led mainly to confusing results. The chief obstacle was that text as a medium is fundamentally different from pictures. Even though Horace's well-known dictum *ut pictura poesis* was time and again hailed as a guideline for visual artists, especially in the 16th century, its applicability had obvious limitations.⁶³ The main difference is that an action progressing through time can be described in words, but cannot easily be rendered in one picture, unless the artist creates a *kontinuierende Darstellung*. Painters and printmakers therefore resorted to a strategy of exploiting those possibilities of their visual medium, which are not within easy reach of writers. They showed several different actions taking place at one and the same moment, which viewers can see in one glimpse, but which writers can only describe in succession. Thus, they pictured Mars arriving at an ill-timed moment, when for once Vulcan and Venus are together, or Cupid with a horse bursting into the room where Mars and Venus are on the point of flagrant action. Visual artists also combined the details of various texts into one picture, making the (illustration of) one text 'comment on' and enhance (the illustration of) the other text, and *vice versa*. Thus, details taken from Homer's and Lucian's account of the tale of Mars and Venus, and even aspects of Lucian's *ekphrasis* of the wedding night of Roxana and Alexander the Great, were brought into the illustrations of Ovid's version in order to add an extra (humorous) dimension. As was to be expected, visual artists also followed or referred to visual traditions and examples. Venus lying naked on a bed waiting for Mars to come, fits in the tradition best represented by Titian's paintings of nude women reclining on a couch. References to Praxiteles' Venus of Cnidos, known through antique descriptions, add a special aspect because they play upon the lusts that Venus evokes through her *pudica* pose.⁶⁴ And finally, there are more subtle references for those viewers who are well versed in literature and visual arts, such as the wooden leg of Vulcan hinting at his bumpy way of walking, which made him the laughingstock of the Olympian gods, or the theme of an old husband married to a young woman, evoking St Joseph and St Mary.

63 Horace, *Ars Poetica* 361. For the concept of *ut pictura poesis* during the Italian Renaissance, see Lee R. W., *Ut pictura poesis. The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: 1967).

64 See above, n. 10.

These creative illustrations of Ovid's tale are not only proof of the artists' ingenious reworking of a text into images, although this feature seems an important part of their appeal. They can also be seen – but do not necessarily have to be – as illustrations of a moral message, warning the observers against the regretful consequences of lust, pleasure and unbridled passions. In this respect, understanding representations of Mars, Venus and Vulcan does not differ from the way Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were generally read in the 16th century, and in the centuries before and after it. The allure of the stories was indisputable, particularly thanks to Ovid's elegant and ingenious way of telling them, even though edifying content was not always apparent and some stories might even be considered immoral or offensive. What exactly Ovid's meaning was, however, seemed to have mattered less than the significance the stories could be imbued with. Thus, during the Middle Ages the stories were instilled with moralizing messages of a Christian nature, that were obviously not in line with what Ovid as a non-Christian author may have intended. Such heavily Christian tainted explanations as were expounded in the *Ovide Moralisé* (early fourteenth century) and Petrus Berchorius's *Ovidius Moralizatus* (1340) no longer dominated the 16th century way of reading Ovid's work. Yet the *Metamorphoses* were still understood as illustrating a moral message, even if the ethics were not always easy to detect.⁶⁵ In fact, the lesson to be learned from Ovid's tales – either from their supposedly edifying content or their deterrent theme – was an important argument to justify the representation of a specific story. For instance, Titian's representations of Danaë lying on her couch while a rain of gold showers on her naked body (c. 1544–45: Naples, Museo di Capodimonte; 1549–50: Madrid, Prado [Fig. 5.13]),⁶⁶ could be seen as an attempt to surpass similar figures made by Michelangelo, Giorgione or other artists (including artists from Antiquity whose works were only known through descriptions or copies from Roman times). They could just as well be appreciated as figures evoking erotic feelings, and, moreover, considered as a warning against the corruptive power of gold and money, which made Danaë give in to the amorous advances of Jupiter and lose her integrity.⁶⁷ This latter understanding may seem stretched, as it presupposes that Danaë

65 Allen D. C., *Mysteriously Meant. The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore MD: 1970) chapter VII; "Undermeanings in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*", 163–199. See also the contribution to this volume by Robert Seiler.

66 *Metamorphoses* IV, 610–11.

67 De Jong J. L., "Spying and Speculating: Francesco Salviati's Painting of King David and Bathsheba in the Palazzo Ricci-Sacchetti in Rome", *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 79.2 (2010) 91–126, esp. 112–114.

consciously and willingly yielded to Jupiter's desires, but it had a long tradition from St Augustine (*De Civitate Dei* 18:13) via Giovanni Boccaccio (*Genealogiae* 2:33) to the *Metamorphoses* commentary of Gioseppe Horologgi and Francesco Turchi of 1571.⁶⁸ Observers may have been preconditioned by this specific tradition of interpreting the myth of Danaë and the shower of gold, and so they could certainly 'read' this moral message in the painting. Titian did not add text or any other explicit clue on how to understand his *Danaë* painting, and he may have done so on purpose. Thus observers were free, if not challenged, to consider the picture in their own way, depending on such circumstances as the company they were with, or the room they were in.

Similarly, pictures of Mars, Venus and Vulcan may be appreciated as attempts to outwit other artists in various media – even Ovid himself. At the same time, they may be understood as moral warnings against the regretful consequences of lust, pleasure and unbridled passions.⁶⁹ Although some visual artists may have considered it necessary to hint explicitly at this latter message, even adding it in writing, other artists left it to the observers to find out what they should make of their rendition of Ovid's tale. Through careful study and by putting the details together, the viewers were to enjoy the pleasure of progressively comprehending the visual version of Ovid's ingeniously told story, of judging and appreciating it, and imbuing it with their own (moral) view and understanding.

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68 De Jong, "Love, Betrayal and Corruption" 23. The commentary of Gioseppe Horologgi and Francesco Turchi was added to Giovanni Andrea dall'Anguillara's *Metamorphoses* translation in *ottava rima* and first published in 1571, by Francesco de'Franceschi Sanese in Venice.

69 See the interesting observations by Noble-Wood, *A Tale Blazed through Heaven* 47–49, and Uchacz, "Mars, Venus, and Vulcan" 254–268.

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