

## *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid: A story of syphilis*

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In 1545, Angelo Bronzino, an Italian mannerist painter from Florence, was commissioned to create a painting that was to become his masterpiece – [An Allegory with Venus and Cupid](#). Hanging in the National Gallery, London, the painting is rich in classical symbolism, in keeping with the allegorical ideals of the High Renaissance. However, for all of this surface-level opulence, the *Allegory* has an altogether more sinister message to convey.

Described by the Gallery as ‘the most frankly erotic painting in the collection’,<sup>1</sup> it provides an insight into the erotic tastes favoured by the Italian and French courts of the 16th century, a time before the widespread recognition of the aetiology of sexually transmitted infections. However, in the 50 years prior to the *Allegory's* conception, Europe was introduced to a new disease – [syphilis](#). This introduction was by means of the so-called ‘Columbian Exchange’,<sup>2</sup> the result of a swapping in diseases between Europe and the New World as a consequence of Christopher Columbus' expedition.<sup>3</sup>

Although physicians of the Renaissance were well studied in the sexual transmission of syphilis (and its agonising consequences), without the concept of bacteriology, they were powerless to cure it. Syphilis gained notoriety as the ‘new plague’ which was so intimately and erotically tied to the ‘act of Venus’<sup>4</sup> that it gave derivation to ‘venereal disease’. Thus, within the classical mythology and stylised imagery of the *Allegory* lies Bronzino's topical public health message: with unchaste love comes not only joy and pleasure, but also painful consequence.

In the centre of the painting the viewer is drawn to the unmistakable figure of Venus, identified by the golden apple in her left hand from the Greek myth *The Judgement of Paris*. Entwined with her is the virile adolescent male figure with wings and quiver, Cupid – her son. The undeniable sexuality of their embrace (Cupid fondling his mother's breast and kissing her parted lips) has long been the subject of scandal and debate. Rather than conveying the act of incest *per se*, Bronzino utilizes these two as symbols for the embodiment of male and female sexuality. Whatever the case, the erotic narrative of the painting becomes immediately clear.

The puzzle of the remaining characters inhabiting the edges of the scene is far more difficult to decipher. Much has been interpreted about them according to the classical perspective. However, an additional hypothesis is that they also accurately portray the clinical presentations of untreated syphilitic infection.

In the top of the painting, behind the aquamarine veil, is the interplay between two characters identifiable on the right as Father Time (symbolized by the hourglass) and on the left as Oblivion. Their actions have been debated extensively. One theory is that Oblivion, with her missing eyes and brain, and hence inability to remember, is attempting to throw a veil over the scene, so that it may be forgotten, bereft of lasting consequence.<sup>5</sup> Father Time on the other hand is forcibly revealing the scandal, implying that the sexual encounter cannot simply be elapsed, and also revealing to the audience the characters of the foreground – each of which display signs of syphilitic infection. In addition to this established interpretation, with her missing eyes and brain Bronzino may also be portraying the neurological consequences of untreated syphilis; characterized by optic nerve involvement and dementia associated with general paresis of the insane.

Below Oblivion is the tortured figure of a man often interpreted to represent Jealousy. In 1986 this classical interpretation was refuted by Conway who provided compelling evidence that the character in fact displayed the clinical signs of secondary syphilis. The figure is held in painful flexion, the periarticular nodal swelling of his fingers evident, pulling at his hair with signs of patchy syphilitic alopecia. In addition, a fingernail is missing, consistent with syphilitic anachonia. His ocular sclera are reddened, and his toothless gums show signs of a sero-sanguinous discharge and perhaps a gumma present on his lower palate.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, his loss of teeth may be the result of the mercury poisoning, the established therapy for syphilis infection in Renaissance times.

In contrast to this tortured soul is the [playful child](#) to the right of the painting showering the besotted Venus and Cupid with rose petals. It is only on closer

inspection that we see the symbolism in this character. His smiling face shows no sign of the trauma ensuing as a large rose thorn pierces through his right foot – engrossed in the passion, he is foolishly indifferent to the damage being caused in pursuit of that passion,<sup>7</sup> interpreted by previous authors as representing Foolish Pleasure.<sup>8</sup> However, is this lack of sensation also the result of syphilitic myelopathy and nerve damage – Tabes dorsalis?

The final character is perhaps the most obtuse and disturbing embodiment of all. The beautiful young girl dressed in green innocuously offers the lovers a honeycomb, symbolic of temptation. Yet on closer inspection she has the body of a monster, complete with a serpentine tail, hidden beneath her green dress. In her left hand she guards from view the sting in her tail, interpreted by many to represent Fraud<sup>7</sup> or Deceit<sup>8</sup> as she is both sweet temptation and evil consequence in one body.<sup>9</sup>

Through his ingenious form of story-telling and exquisite clinical detailing, Bronzino ensured from the moment it was created, the *Allegory* was to be his masterpiece. Still the subject of continued intrigue and debate, Bronzino promotes his hidden public health message to the modern audience; as relevant today as it was nearly five centuries before.

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## Footnotes

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### DECLARATIONS –

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