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The Demotion of Cupid:

The Weakening of a Former God through Blindfolds, Bonds, Lust, and Youth

Young, mischievous, innocent—these are all common characteristics the average modern person associates with Cupid. How is it that these characteristics describe a figure who was once believed to be one of the most powerful and revered gods of the Hellenistic pantheon? Opan sources depict Cupid as an all-powerful being who had power over the instincts of animals, mortals, and even his fellow gods (Panofsky 98). He was well respected to the point that he was able to request that Zeus, the king of the gods, intervene on his behalf on certain occasions. Yet, over time Cupid was weakened and demoted from his powerful godly status in his artistic representations. By the time the Hellenistic pantheon of gods is depicted in Medieval art, Cupid is no longer shown amongst their numbers (Panofsky 98). By the time of the Renaissance and the Baroque periods, Cupid was depicted as a winged infant who was limited and weakened in four distinct categories: by blindfolds, shackles or bondage, lust, and youth.

Using the figures of Antiquity in the art of the Renaissance was common, but how exactly did this trend come about? It was not until the thirteenth century that Italy, which would become the heart of the Renaissance, became actively involved in the culture of the time. Prior to this point, Italy had lagged behind the other Western countries when it came to participating in the culture of the Middle Ages (Kristeller *Renaissance Thought* 192). The contributing reason for this occurrence was because Italy was more directly exposed to the Byzantine Empire and its

culture than any of the other Western European countries, which were more prone to following the cultural example of France. This connection allowed the Italians to continue with their traditions, some which extended as far back as to the Roman Empire. After the thirteenth century, the French cultural influence finally gained prominence in Italy. After maintaining such strong relations with their traditions, the Italians adopted the new French culture by combining it with their previously ingrained thought process, which yielded products such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the poetry of Ariosto and Tasso (94). It was in this time that humanism began to take shape. Paul Oskar Kristeller defines humanism as "the general tendency of the age to attach the greatest importance to classical studies, and to consider classical antiquity as the common standard and model by which to guide all cultural activities" (*Renaissance Thought I* 95).

It was the rise of the humanist movement that generated the increase of interest in classic scholarship. Those who were invested in the study of Latin rediscovered many texts that had been neglected in the Middle Ages. It was these scholars who were responsible for giving rise to the popular Latin authors whose names are now well known (96). The best known of these authors would be Ovid and Apuleius. More important than the humanists' Latin revival was their revival of Greek studies. In the Middle Ages, the study of Greek had all but died in Western Europe. Those few that actually bothered themselves to learn the language rarely took an interest in Greek classic literature. However, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries interest in Greek writing began to grow, and numerous copies were translated into the more commonly used Latin for Western libraries (96). However, the texts that were translated in these centuries were more concerned with the more scientific fields of mathematics, medicine, Aristotelian philosophy, astronomy, and astrology. It was not until the Renaissance that this same interest was shown for Greek classical literature (97). It was during the time of the Renaissance that scholars witnessed

a revival and rebirth of education and the arts (92). This rebirth completely shaped learning in the Renaissance. Petrarch, Valla, Erasmus, and Vives all used classical learning to displace the prior system of the Medieval Period (99). By the fourteenth century both classical authors and poetry were taught in Italy. The next century saw classical Greek authors and prose made available for those who wished to learn it outside of the country (110).

These changes meant that not only were classical references available to Renaissance period Italians, but that many were devouring any available information they could get into their possession. The artists of the Renaissance would have been able to use the figures of Antiquity and be aware of what these figures represented. The tradition that these artists laid down would be followed by the later artists of the Baroque period.

Renaissance artists more commonly used Hellenistic literature as a reference for their art because the literature held a higher prestige in Antiquity than the visual arts of painting and sculpting. Because of this, details would be more valued in the written word than in the visual arts. (Kirsteller *Renaissance Thought II* 169). The term “art” applied to almost any handicraft or science in the Latin and Greek languages (166). In Antiquity there was no such thing as “Fine Arts” (164). In fact, in Antiquity there was no muse for painting or sculpture (174), meaning painting was not taken as seriously in Antiquity as it was in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. So, the artists had to look at serious and respectable materials as references to produce serious and respectable materials, which meant that they looked to the literature of Antiquity for their references.

In his prime in the Hellenistic period, Cupid was seen as a deity who held sway over the mortal world as well as the world of the gods. However, by the time of the Renaissance the artists were depicting Cupid in a very different light. This evolution in the Renaissance was slow

but noticeable. A blind cupid was the most prevalent representation of this fallen god. Rather than depicting a naturally blind Cupid with white or glazed over eyes, the Renaissance and Baroque artists followed earlier iconography which blinded Cupid with a blindfold. Blindness became a common attribute of Cupid in art as early as the thirteenth century (Panofsky 105). It was in the beginning of this century that the poet Thomasin von Zerclaere wrote his poem “Der Wälshe Gast,” in which Love says, “I am blind, and I make blind” (107), which illustrates the developing belief in Europe that love was blind. This idea was used by poets and artists alike in their work when personifying love.

Interestingly, by making Cupid blind the artists demoted Cupid to the level of the demigods Plutus and Tyche, who represented wealth and fate respectively. These two were often depicted in the Hellenistic times as the ones who were blind and uncaring. In the story of Apuleius’ *The Transformations of Lucius*, or *The Golden Ass*, the difference in power between gods like Cupid and the weaker demigods like Tyche is blatantly shown. Throughout the story the narrator and main character, Lucius, provides characterizations of divinity through stories that he hears on his journey, the prayers he makes, and through actual meetings with the gods. Lucius bemoans Tyche for her blindness to his own plight. He was transformed into a donkey and stolen in a raid by bandits. He was forced to work for them as a beast of labor, constantly praying to Tyche that he would be freed from his slavery. Instead, he watched as wicked men like the bandits prosper while righteous men like him suffered. In one instance he tries to outrun a dog that is chasing him: “Breathing a silent prayer to the God of Luck [Tyche] I galloped off at such a speed that I felt more like a heavily backed race-horse than an ass. But even with this remarkable turn of speed I could not out-distance the fate that dogged at my heels...” (Apuleius

76). Tyche turns a blind eye to Lucius' prayers and the dog continues to hound the transfigured man until he is ensnared in a thorn bush.

Cupid is shown in a very different light in Apuleius' tale, as Cupid's courtship of Psyche is told as a side story within the narrative. Cupid is a force to be reckoned with in this story. The god is neither cruel nor blind like Tyche. He is "the gentlest and sweetest of all wild creatures" (117). Even the great Jupiter, king of all the gods, recognizes Cupid's strength and that he is not one who can be controlled. When Cupid stands before Jupiter on Psyche's behalf, Jupiter shows him respect and praises his power:

Jupiter pinched his [Cupid's] handsome cheeks and kissed his hand. Then he said: 'My masterful child, you never pay me the respect which has been decreed me by the Council of Gods, and you're always shooting your arrows into my divine heart—the very seat of the laws that govern the four elements and all the constellations of the sky.' (141)

Here, Jupiter calls Cupid out for not showing him his due respect. He also recognizes that Cupid has power over him, and, thus, over all the world. Yet Jupiter does not begrudge Cupid, rather he accepts all of these things as part of Cupid's nature and agrees to help Cupid become wed with Psyche as long as Cupid agrees to use his powers to find Jupiter a mortal female who is Psyche's equal in beauty. This deal shows that Cupid's power over Jupiter was recognized in the time that Apuleius was crafting his story.

By the time Cupid is depicted in the Renaissance, however, he will have been weakened through blindfolds, bonds, lust, and youth. It must be understood that the paintings that were chosen to act as examples of these weakening attributes of Cupid are extraordinary cases. Three of the paintings were commissioned by royal courts and the fourth (Rembrandt's *Danae*) is

believed to have been a gift to an esteemed member of Dutch society. All of these paintings were well thought out, and not a single detail was overlooked by any of their artists, which means that each of the artists who are about to be discussed thought out exactly how their Cupid was going to appear. Though these paintings may not serve as representations of the average Renaissance or Baroque painting, they do serve as the best examples in illustrating each particular weakness.

One of the most ideal examples of a blind or blindfolded Cupid appears in Sandro Botticelli's painting entitled *Primavera* (Figure 1). The painting was commissioned by the Medici family in 1482. For many years, scholars were of the opinion that the painting had been made for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco because the painting had hung at the house of his nephew and ward Giovanni delle Bande Nere, in Castello in the early sixteenth century. However, recently published inventories reveal that the painting had in fact been meant for the Medici's Florence palace (Lightbown 122). The painting style of *Primavera* is similar to that of a tapestry due to the fact that in Botticelli's time paintings and tapestries were considered equals in the art field (123). The idea for the painting's composition came from an illustration of Dante's Earthly Paradise out of a Sieneese illuminated edition of Dante's *Divina Commedia* (Marmor 9).

The painting itself is a collection of characters from Greco-Roman mythology. The center figure is none other than the goddess Venus, Cupid's mother. Surprisingly, Botticelli breaks away from the typical Renaissance portrayal of Venus by depicting her as the goddess of matrimony rather than lust (Lightbown 128). To the right walk Flora and a nymph who is being pursued by the god of winds, Zephyrus. On the other side of Venus are the three Graces who dance about in a circle with their hands and limbs entwined. Beyond them stands a figure that appears to be Mercury. He is reaching up to take a fruit from one of the many trees whose foliage hangs above this large crowd. Amongst these blossoming and overhanging branches flies Cupid.

His pose is similar to the poses the putti commonly found on Roman sarcophagi, which was often mimicked by the sculptors of the Renaissance, as well as the painters (128). The setting of this jovial gathering is in the garden of the Hesperidies. This setting is revealed by the golden apples growing on the trees. It was the job of the Hesperidies to guard these golden fruits for the goddess Hera.

It is only Venus, the Graces, and Cupid that are of concern for this paper. Botticelli's placement of Venus makes certain that no viewer will ever miss her son floating above. Botticelli places Venus's head higher than those of all the other figures besides Cupid's. This placement leads the viewer's eyes up to Cupid, guaranteeing that he will not be overlooked. Cupid is unable to see the crowd he flies above, as a white blindfold is wrapped securely around eyes. Despite his blindness he still takes aim with his bow and arrow and directs it into the collection of figures below. His arrow is pointed directly at the Grace farthest from him. His chosen target reveals both his blind state and his ignorance of who is attending this garden party with his mother.

Botticelli made use of any detail he could to show the Graces' pureness and virginity. The most noticeable sign of their purity is the flowing white robes which wrap around their bodies as they dance. Each of these females also wears pearls, which are also associated with purity and virginity (130). It almost seems as though Botticelli has gone to greater lengths to stress the targeted Grace's innocence by adding the extra detail of the pendant around her neck. The jewels that make up the pendant's design are pearls and a sapphire. The light blue shade of the sapphire was meant to cool fiery emotions and to keep the wearer chaste. This superstition made sapphire rings popular as gifts to nuns, who even today are recognized as chaste figures of chastity (130). As the Graces dance about, they remain ignorant of the looming danger floating above them.

The Graces' ominous danger comes from the blind winged youth and his flaming arrow. The arrow's purpose is to ignite its target's heart with the burning flames of desire, similar to Politian's *Stanze* (128). Botticelli may have found the inspiration for this in a text of Apuleius which found itself often re-translated and misinterpreted in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The passage reads:

You would have taken these round-limbed, milk-white boys for genuine Cupids who had just flown in from the sky or sea. For both their little wings and their little arrows and the remainder of their attire conformed to their beautiful looks, and they lit the path of their lady with burning torches as if she were going to a marriage feast. (Gombrich "Botticelli's" 49)

Botticelli's cupid is indeed "round-limb" and "milk-white" just as in Apuleius' text. If this text were indeed the inspiration for this Cupid's flaming arrow, it means that the Botticelli meant for this unsuspecting Grace to soon be infected with a yearning desire that could only be fulfilled in a marriage bed. It is highly likely that this was indeed a source for the artist, since he depicts the blind Cupid almost floating above Venus, matching the description found in Beroaldus' 1501 edition of the text: "Venus began to step forward among the winged cupids whose winglets floated lightly" (49).

All of these elements create an almost cautionary picture of love. In his blindness, Cupid will accidentally strike a Grace who is a symbol of purity and chastity. His arrow will infect her with burning desires that will cause her to strip away these attributes of purity so that she can satisfy her lust. If there is any doubt as to the farthest Grace being Cupid's unintentional target, one need only to look at the number of pearls she wears for confirmation. While the Grace

closest to Cupid wears stings of the white stones in her hair and while the middle Grace wears dozens of the precious stone as part of the hemming of her robe, the farthest Grace wears only five pearls. It is as if Botticelli intends to make the shedding of this Grace's innocence fairly easy once she is pierced by Cupid's flaming arrow. By having fewer pearls to show her status as a virgin, it will be easier for her to discard them faster than either of her sisters. This minimal amount of pearls seems to almost doom her, for she has fewer safeguards and delays on her road to the wedding bed. Her vulnerability creates caution for all mortal females. If a Grace seems liable to fall into the throws of temptation because of the fires of love, how could a mere mortal hope to be safe? The painting further illustrates that love is blind and capable of hitting anyone. Cupid's blindfold stops him from recognizing who should serve as a target, meaning that he may shoot those who have no wish to have passion kindled within them.

Just as his blindness will cause him to hit an unwitting target, blindness also causes the Cupid to not see the dozen of likely targets that would not mind being pierced by his arrow. There is the Grace who is closest to the paintings center who glances over her dancing sisters and watches Mercury, who stands by viewing fruit instead of realizing the attention from the Grace (Marmor 12). If Cupid were to have his vision, he may realize his arrow would be put to better use for this pair than for the unwitting Grace he is about to strike.

Another theme that contributes to the idea of a weakened Cupid is the bound Cupid. The best representation of which was inspired by the Renaissance tradition and crafted in the Baroque period. It is Rembrandt van Rijn's simply titled painting *Danae* (Figure 2). The painting was crafted as a gift for Constantijn Huygens in 1639 (Schwartz 130). It is theorized that Rembrandt's lover, Saskia, served as the model for the central figure of Danae. The painting was one of the few mythological paintings that Rembrandt would make in the 1630s (Wallace). The

painting was only altered by Rembrandt once after its initial completion. In the 1650s Rembrandt would repaint the image to move Danae's hand to heighten a more mature sense of beauty in woman (Gerson 112). However, some scholars argue that the picture is not actually of Danae. These scholars suggest other, lesser known women of classical mythology are the central figures of the painting. However, the majority follow Panofsky's theory that the figure is indeed Danae greeting Zeus. The painting is currently located in the Hermitage in Leningrad (Wallace). *Danae's* original appearance was destroyed when a man slashed the painting's canvas and splashed it with acid. Though the painting was saved, the golden light that once depicted Zeus is all but gone. Besides this, all details were saved by conservators.

The myth of Danae is a tragic tale of forbidden love that never makes any true links to Cupid. Despite this, Cupid is present in a majority of painters' depiction of the forlorn woman being visited by her lover. In the original story, Danae is locked away in a tower after her father, King Akrision, is told by an oracle that she would bear a son who would eventually kill him. Her father decides to have her locked away from all humanity to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy. However, the great god Zeus spots Danae, and approaches her in the form of a golden shower. Through this meeting, Danae finds herself pregnant with a son (Wallace). Rembrandt chose to show a scene within the story that was fairly commonplace amongst his contemporaries, that is the meeting of Danae and the golden rain or light. What makes Rembrandt's painting unique among these is his use of Cupid.

The painting shows a nude Danae reclining upon her bed. Her hand reaches into a golden light that diffuses throughout the entire room. This light is, of course, her lover Zeus. Her face is dreamy, if a bit sad. Her elderly maid leans in, but is unable to see anything amiss. Meanwhile,

Cupid watches on in tears. Cupid appears to be a part of the headboard on which he rests, and can easily blend in with his surroundings.

When Rembrandt painted *Danae* he was making common use of brass plaque charms in his painting. For example, in an etching from the same year as *Danae* Rembrandt made an etching of Joannes Wtenbogart with a brass sculpture of the serpent of Moses in the background. Rembrandt made use of brass plaques in *Danae* by depicting Cupid as one so that he could incorporate the weak and winged youth. He accomplished this by making Cupid a part of Danae's elaborate headboard. (Schwartz 129). The figure reclines atop the headboard with his hands bound in front of him. His head is lowered as tears fall down his cheeks. His face is contorted by his pain and sorrow. The other two full bodied characters in the painting, Danae and her female servant, are oblivious to Cupid's agony.

But why is Cupid bound and crying if this is a painting that depicts the two lovers coming together? It is to show Cupid's weakness and inability to aid Zeus and Danae in their affair. By binding Cupid, Rembrandt shows that the demoted god is not permitted to assist the pair in anyway. He is forced to sit and watch them, and despair that their love will never last. His bindings prevent him from shooting the lovers with his arrows, thus unable to infect the two with an undying love.

Rembrandt also highlights the bound god's helplessness by making him part of the furniture. In doing so, Rembrandt makes Cupid a part of the prison that was constructed to keep Danae forever chaste. The god sits upon the headrest with his body illuminated, but the illumination fades away in his wings. His wings fade into the same tone as the rest of the bed's ornaments, which renders Cupid as a mere piece of Danae's prison. Cupid is thus bound and kept from his proper and assigned duties because he has become a part of something that goes against

his very nature. The combination of his binding and becoming a part of the problem has driven Cupid into the deep and horrible agony that is witnessed by the painting's audience. It means that while love does exist in Danae's world, it is unable to actually intercede in her life.

Rembrandt's representation of the myth is different compared to others of its time. For one, Zeus is depicted as a golden mist coming to Danae, not as the shower of golden coins that is commonly used in the paintings of his predecessors and contemporaries. Another difference is his choice to directly acknowledge Cupid's weakness instead of only weakly alluding to it. For example, in Titian's 1544 *Danae*, which currently resides in the Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, the artist portrayed Cupid as unbound and obediently following Zeus (Humfrey 199). Even though Titian's Cupid is attempting to assist the lovers with their forbidden romance, he is unable to fulfill anything. Even though he carries a bow, Cupid is defenseless and without any arrows. Without his arrows, Cupid will not be able to work any of his powers. Titian did not follow with Rembrandt's example; instead choosing to allude to Cupid's weakened state instead of directly parading it like Rembrandt.

The less noticeable theme of Cupid being weakened through beauty is best represented by Agnolo Bronzino's *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid* (Figure 3), which currently resides in London's National Gallery. There is minimal knowledge on this painting's provenance, except for a short description by Vasari stating that "...a painting of singular beauty, which was sent to France for King Francis; in which was a naked Venus with a Cupid who was kissing her, and on one side Pleasure and Play (il Giuoco) with the other loves, and on the other side Fraud, Jealousy and the other passions of love" (McCorquodale 87). However, McCorquodale points out several flaws in trusting Vasari as the only source for *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid's* provenance. He points out that the Vasari does not record all the figures in the painting. McCorquodale's only

explanation for this is that it is that Vasari wrote this description down years after the painting was sent to France; these years that passed may have faded his memory. Or it is probable that Vasari never even saw the actual painting and was working from other descriptions. What is known of the painting's history is that it came to reside in London's National Gallery after leaving the Beaucousin collection of Paris, and that there is no evidence of it ever being in the French Royal collection (87). This confusion makes it harder to discern just who the painting was intended for, which could have possibly helped to solve some of the mysteries behind the artwork.

The masterpiece itself is complex and loaded with symbolism. There are a large number of *pentimenti* that are both discernable with either the viewer's own eyes or with the assistance of an X-ray photograph, meaning that Bronzino must have been pressed to complete the painting quickly, something that is quite unusual for this particular artist (88). The style appears heavily influenced by Mannerism with the figures taking extreme poses. Unlike Botticelli's *Primavera*, this entire painting is dedicated to showing Cupid's weakness.

The two main subjects of the painting are Venus and Cupid. Venus allows Cupid to caress and kiss her as she steals his golden arrow and prepares to pierce him. Swinburne provides the best literary portrait of the mixture of coyness and deception in Venus' eyes. His description of the goddess' eyes reads, "Cold eyes that hide like a jewel/Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour" (88). As Venus seduces her son, the other figures watch on. Folly, in the guise of a young boy, grins foolishly as he walks towards the couple, preparing to shower them with a handful of pink flower petals. Behind him stands the demented form of Pleasure. On the other side of the romantic pair in the center huddles Jealousy, who is tearing at her hair and goes unnoticed by any of the others in the busy composition. Behind these five figures Time and Fraud fight over the

blue cloth that conceals the illicit love affair. Fraud tries to keep the cloth up, while Time fights to wrench the cloth from her hands and reveal what is happening. Time appears much stronger and determined than Fraud and is destined to eventually win.

All of these things reflect poorly for Cupid. Michael Levey's proposition that the painting's proper title should be changed to *The Triumph of Venus* is an excellent one (89). The entire painting is about Venus' triumph over Cupid, or rather beauty over love. Venus has succeeded in stealing the heart of Cupid's power, his arrow, from him with him being none the wiser through her trickery. Should the fact that Venus is a representation of beauty be contested, one need only to look at what the goddess holds in her left hand. In this hand is the golden apple which she won when she was selected as the fairest of all the goddesses by Paris. The presence of the apple in the painting affirms Venus' standing as both the most beautiful goddess and the goddess of beauty. Thus, Venus is the personification of beauty, just as all the other characters represent a more complex idea.

It appears that many of the players in the scene are working to aid Venus/Beauty in her triumph and seduction of Cupid. Folly blocks the bitter side of Pleasure from Cupid's sight. If Cupid were to look in their direction at the moment, the young and winged boy would only see the sweet side of Pleasure which offers a piece of a honeycomb. Pleasure helps Venus/Beauty seduce Cupid by showing him only her sweet side. Folly succeeds in blocking the deformed reptilian body and hand bearing the bitter stinger from Cupid's gaze. McCorquodale makes an intriguing point when he deduces that the only people able to see the dark side of Pleasure are the non-participating viewers of the painting (89). Fraud also aids Venus/Beauty's seduction by holding up the sheet that shields the affair from the rest of the world.

There are two figures who do not aid Venus/Beauty. Jealousy watches and becomes contorted by her despise of what she sees, but she does not intercede for Cupid. The only one who tries to help the young boy who has been blinded and made a fool by the beauty of the woman before him is Time. Time struggles against Fraud to reveal the affair and spare Cupid from the humiliation of being seduced by his mother. His struggles are in vain though, for Venus/Beauty already holds Cupid's arrow, and she will pierce the boy with it before Time can rip the cloth from Fraud's hands and Cupid will be infected with infatuation and the fires of love.

Bronzino's Cupid has none of the strength and power of the Hellenistic Cupid. The Cupid of Apuleius' *The Transformations of Lucius* never sought after Venus in this fashion. Nor did he ever fall prey to his mother's manipulations. In fact, the story of Cupid and Psyche within *The Transformations of Lucius* feature Cupid continuously out-manipulating Venus' plans. This Cupid of Antiquity would never let himself be duped by one of Venus's lustful glances and demure smiles.

The final representation of the weakened Cupid is probably the most prevalent in art—the cupid that is weakened by his own youth. An excellent example of this weakening is Titian's *Education of Cupid* from 1565 (Figure 4). *Education of Cupid* was painted in Titan's decline, when the artist was well into his 70's (Morassi 48). The painting's original owner was Antonio Pérez, who served as the chief minister to Philip II (Humfrey 341). Titian had painted many pictures for Philip II and his court in this decade, including the 1564 *Last Supper* and *Christ and the Pharisee* in 1568 (Morassi 48-50). Since *Education of Cupid* bears a similar composition to Titian's earlier *Allegory of Marriage*, many have presumed that it bears a relation to marriage. However, it is unlikely that the painting was meant as a type of wedding gift, since Pérez was already married when he received the painting (Humfrey 341). In 1648 Ridolfi mentions the

painting, calling it *The Graces and Cupid*, in the house of Prince Borghese (Morassi plate 29). Besides the previously mentioned two names, the painting has also been called *Venus Blind Folding Cupid* (Humfrey 341).

The painting features two cupids, each as a young and fearful child. They gather by Venus, one laying his head in her lap and the other one hiding behind her shoulder. Across from the trio stand two nymphs who hold Cupid's traditional bow and arrow. Panofsky suggests that the two youth represent Eros and Anteros. Eros is the one who stands in front of Venus, and represents blind, earthly love. Anteros is the youth behind Venus, and represents the clear-sighted love of the divine according to Panofsky (341). Despite just what portion of Cupid these two are meant to represent, they also effectively show the two ways youth cripples Cupid from completing his purposes in Renaissance and Baroque art.

Eros, the representative of earthly love, is reduced to nothing more than a terrified child seeking comfort from his mother. He twists his body away from the approaching nymphs, fearful of them like many young children to strangers. He buries his face in Venus' lap, as though hoping she will protect him and send away the other two females. This youthful embodiment of Cupid does not have any desire to claim the tools of his trade being offered to him by the nymphs. The cupid of Apuleius' time would never show such fear and cowardice. Nor would that Cupid deny himself the bows and arrows which gave him power over Zeus himself. Where Apuleius' Cupid was self-assured and proud, Titian's Cupid, in the form of Eros, flees to his mother for comfort and assistance. Instead of receiving said comfort from his mother, the Eros Cupid is instead blindfolded by his mother, which further inhibits him. In his youth, he trusts his mother and does not fight this further weakening. Even if he tried to shake her off, he would

easily be subdued by his mother. It seems likely that some fight like that may have happened, as Eros seems to sulk at his helplessness as the blindfold is tied around his head.

Meanwhile Anteros, the representative of divine love, cowers behind his mother. He is no more willing to claim his bow and arrow from the well meaning nymphs. He hides behind Venus, cautiously peering over her shoulder to see what the nymphs are doing. Even though he makes eye contact with them, his body posture shows that he is still shifting back and forth, uncertain of what to do about these two nymphs. Anteros fears these women and the duty they are trying to bestow upon him just like his counterpart, Eros. Here Titian shows Cupid as a child who is frightened of his future and adulthood and not as the calm and confident god known to Antiquity. That Cupid would certainly never hide behind his mother, especially from something as minor as a pair of nymphs. Even though Venus has her head turned to speak comforting words to this son, he appears to not be yielding to her words of comfort. Nor do the kind and comforting words spoken by the nymphs, who are obviously trying to get the boys to trust them, seem to have any effect upon Anteros or Eros.

Should Eros or Anteros ever overcome their fears of the nymphs and accept the gifts, they still need to be taught how to wield them, which would lead to the education which is mentioned in the painting's title. This level of youth induced naivety and innocence further weakens the pair, as they now must be taught how to do something which seemed to come innately to Cupid in the stories of Antiquity.

Youth seems to have made these Cupids far more complacent than their more mature counterpart of Antiquity. Titian depicts the two inhabiting a world full of the soothing colors of blue and white, colors that would be used to calm the senses rather than arouse them. It is outsiders like the nymphs who are introducing the Cupids to fiery and bold shades of red, a color

meant to invoke strong emotions like love. But in youthful fear of the unknown, Titian's Cupid's flee from this color, which should very well be a part of their nature.

Thus, Cupid is effectively weakened by his own youth. Titian shows Cupid as a young child who is fearful of his adult responsibilities. He also depicts the Eros version of Cupid as seeking poor council from his mother believing, like many children, that he can blindly trust his parent, which actually leads to poor Eros actually being made blind by Venus. At the same time, Anteros witnesses this, yet his youthful naiveté still leaves him trusting Venus from the inevitable.

Depicting Cupid as a child was not unique; rather it was the accepted norm of both the Renaissance and Baroque periods. However, not all of these depictions show a youthful Cupid directly weakened by this youth. Botticelli's and Rembrandt's Cupids were not weakened by youth, but by external bindings like blindfolds and shackles. In the case of Bronzino, some might argue that Venus, and thus beauty and lust, triumphed over Cupid by taking advantage of his youthful naiveté. However, after an examination of this Cupid's almost aggressive advancements towards Venus, one can tell that he is not inexperienced in the realm of adult matters such as sex. This experience effectively shows that Cupid was not weakened by childlike foolishness in *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid*.

However, depicting Cupid as a child does reveal some light into what all four of these artists were thinking when they painted the demoted god. E.H. Gombrich puts forth the theory that the appearance of a personification in art is just as important as that personification's actions. That is, how a personification appears is equally important in meaning as to what the personification is doing (Gombrich "Icones" 129). In his essay, Gombrich uses Peter Paul Reubens' *Horrors of War* from 1637 to illustrate his point. However, for the sake of this essay

Gombrich's theory will be applied to Cupid's representation in the previously discussed paintings of Botticelli, Rembrandt, Bronzino, and Titian.

In Botticelli's *Primavera* Cupid is depicted performing the action of firing one of his flaming arrows of passion into a crowded garden party beneath him. This shows Cupid as reckless and blind, like the turbulent love he is supposed to personify. But what does his physical appearance show? It shows the viewer a young boy who is trying his best to take aim when there is no way for him to properly determine a target. Botticelli shows that even though Cupid may be blind, he still will try to his fullest to perform his given duties, which speaks volumes for the artist's views on both Cupid and love. In *Primavera*, Cupid is shown as a being who wished to do his job, despite the fact that he cannot properly do it as long as he is weakened by the blindfold wrapped tightly around his eyes.

Rembrandt shows something very similar to Botticelli's Cupid with his own Cupid in *Danae*. In this Baroque masterpiece, Cupid weeps due to his inability to help smooth the progress of Danae and Zeus' romance. Rembrandt painted the young god's appearance to heighten the pain, sorrow, and agony that Cupid feels. Cupid curls into himself, as though in physical pain from his plight. His childish face, which would be well suited for a happy demeanor, is lined with many wrinkles, each caused by his sadness. The sorrow is so great that tears fall down his face freely with no shame. His wings are beginning to darken at their tips, as though being cut off from his job of delivering love is taking away the luminescence and power that he might naturally exude as an active god. By painting so much pain and suffering into such a small figure, Rembrandt shows that Cupid is miserable in his weakened state. Unlike Botticelli's Cupid, Rembrandt's Cupid is unable to even try to complete his job. There is no way that he can wield a bow and arrow with his hands bound as tightly as they are. By being weakened with the

shackles, Cupid is unable to fulfill his duties and the fact physically and emotionally pains him to the point where the pain is transforming his very appearance. Here is an example of a Cupid that longs to once again hold his bow and arrow so that he may strike the fires of passion in the hearts of the lovers that he witnesses.

An Allegory of Venus and Cupid carries similar themes to these other two paintings. Bronzino painted Cupid being tricked by his mother, Venus, and her assistants. But what does Bronzino's Cupid look like? His cheeks are bright pink, which stands out in a stark contrast with the rest of his pale ivory skin. His hair is a mop of golden curls, with one particular curled lock falling into his face in the center of his forehead. If it were not for his actions he would appear to be a very innocent youth. When the audience looks at Cupid's eyes, they will see that he looks devotedly down at Venus while he kisses her. Though it may be unnerving to the audience that he is making such forward advances towards his mother, it cannot be denied that his eyes show his complete devotion to her in this moment. Venus' eyes in comparison do not show this complete devotion, splitting their attention between Cupid and the golden arrow Venus is stealing from him. Bronzino shows us a Cupid who is true in his intentions, although they are misguided in his weakness to beauty and lust.

Finally, there are the two Cupids from Titian's *Education of Cupid*. These two Cupids, weakened by their own youth, are cowering in fear from the nymphs offering them the gifts of their bow and arrows. Titian makes them appear as extremely young children to emphasize their adolescence and innocence. Neither of them seems fully capable of standing on their own, as they both lean heavily on Venus, which further accentuates their youth and frailty. In this painting, Titian presents Eros and Anteros as innocent children unsure of the world around them

through both their actions and appearances. This innocence of youth leaves the two weak and unable to fulfill their presumed responsibilities.

When one applies all this information with Gombrich's theory, what can be determined about the true nature of the Renaissance and Baroque period Cupid? By acknowledging that all of these artists depicted the god as a child, it can be accepted that he was seen as innocent to some level. Botticelli and Rembrandt manage to show just how Cupid's bow and arrows are integral to him. Botticelli shows that though Cupid cannot take proper aim, he will still wield them. Rembrandt shows how the greatly broken Cupid would become if he would be unable perform his given job. Both of these artists show that though he is weak, Cupid still yearns to kindle love in the hearts of others. They depict an innocent cupid whose nature is to create love. This nature cannot be denied, or else Cupid will end up similar to the horrible wretch that Rembrandt painted for *Danae*.

As a whole, these artists show a Cupid who is weak but not malignant in nature. In all four cases Cupid's weakness does not turn him to acts of wickedness, meaning that, regardless of what weakens or inhibits Cupid, he still will stick to his pure purpose. He will never act out cruelly or out of spite; he was depicted as a well-meaning youth who was just unable to handle the task assigned to him.

Does this have any bearing to the Cupid of Antiquity, namely the Cupid of Apuleius' *The Transformations of Lucius*? These figures of the Renaissance and Baroque are pale shadows of the Cupid that was known in the ages of Antiquity. The Renaissance and Baroque period painters created a well intentioned Cupid who was unable to fulfill his given nature and duty because he was weakened by blindfolds, shackles, lust and beauty, youth, or some combination of the above. This is nothing like the Cupid from Apuleius' story, who could wield his powers over even the

most powerful of gods, Zeus. The artists of the Renaissance and Baroque took Cupid's youthfulness to the extreme to fully accentuate what they saw as the god's natural innocence. This innocence was not always depicted in Antiquity. In Apuleius' story Cupid is a young man who is old enough to wed the beautiful Psyche. Also, he is manipulative enough to work behind his mother's back both by marrying Psyche and asking Zeus to defend his wife from anymore of Venus' manipulations.

Though the artists from the Renaissance and Baroque used inspiration from Antiquity, they failed to properly follow and maintain Cupid's general characteristics and strengths. Where in Antiquity Cupid was acknowledged as a strong and cunning god of the Pantheon, the later artists would misinterpret him as a weak and childish figure under the power of those like Zeus and Venus. To further accentuate this demotion, artists like the ones discussed in this paper used means like blindfolds and bindings to advance the weakening of this demoted god. They made him unable to counteract his youth or resist the manipulations of beauty and lust. It was in this manner that the god Cupid was weakened in his representation in the Renaissance and Baroque.

Referenced Images



Figure 1: *Primavera*, Botticelli



Figure 2: *Danae*, Rembrandt



Figure 3: *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid*, Bronzino



Figure 4: *Education of Cupid*, Titian

Illustration Acknowledgments

1. Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1482, photograph, Florence, Uffizi Gallery of Florence.
2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Danae*, 1639, photograph, St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum.
3. Agnolo Bronzino, *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid*, 1546, photograph, London, National Gallery.
4. Titian, *Education of Cupid*, 1565, photograph, Rome, Borghese Gallery.

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