

RAPHAEL (1483–1520)

The Dream of a Knight, about 1504

Oil on panel, 17.5 × 17.5 cm
 (painted surface 17.1 × 17.3 cm)
 The National Gallery, London (NG 213)

Raphael established a connection with Siena in around 1503, working with Pintoricchio on the Piccolomini Library frescoes (see cat. 74–6). Though he may never have returned to the city, his ties with Sieneſe patrons continued; his lost, but much-copied *Madonna del Silenzio* tondo was seemingly made for a member of the Piccolomini family.¹ Thus the suggestion that the *Dream of a Knight* and its companion picture, the very slightly smaller *Three Graces* (fig. 73), were commissioned by a member of the Borghesi family, a theory based in large measure on their shared early seventeenth-century provenance in the Roman collection of the Cardinal Scipione Borghese (whose ancestry was Sieneſe), is not implausible.² Certainly, both works are not only informed by a knowledge of the works of art that could be seen in Siena, but they seem to allude to subject-matter particularly dear to Sieneſe patrons in the years around 1500.

That is not to say that the subject of the *Dream of a Knight* can – or should – be defined precisely. Efforts to associate it with one or another specific literary text have generally proved flawed – this is no mere illustration – and are probably misguided. The *Dream of a Knight* is an intentionally mysterious image, a web of references and visual prompts. Just like the most sophisticated works made in this period for private devotion, it is a picture intended to support sustained meditation, not in this case on religion, but upon love and virtue, poetry and painting itself. Its function is declared by its small scale and the jewel-like precision of its execution; this was a picture to be examined, repeatedly, at very close quarters, like a manuscript illumination or an engraved ancient gem, picking

out new details with each viewing and making new connections between its component parts. The picture was very carefully planned and was realised using a pricked cartoon now in the British Museum (1994-5-14-57).³

In the centre foreground, a handsome youth dressed in *all'antica* armour lies asleep propped up against his shield, beneath a laurel (or bay) tree, which provides a strong vertical accent within the composition and divides the space into two distinct zones. The first – on the left – is occupied by a woman with bare feet, soberly garbed; her overdress is purple, *‘di nobilissimo colore, umile e onesto’* (‘in the most noble colour, humble and honest’, Dante, *Vita nuova*, II, 3). Her head is modestly covered, and her expression supremely tender. She brandishes a sword, and immediately above the knight’s head, a book. On the right is another bare-footed woman, with a contrastingly bright red dress and sky-blue overdress. Her draperies are more animated than those of her opposite, with her overdress ‘hitched up becomingly at her hip’.⁴ Her golden hair is uncovered, knotted loosely behind her neck and entwined with a veil that twists under her left arm. Her pose mirrors that of the lady opposite and, in place of the book, she holds a sprig of flowers – with another tucked into her hair. This is often thought to be her only attribute, but in fact the coral beads that are twisted through her hair and criss-cross her torso are looped through her left hand. They therefore become the equivalent of the other lady’s sword. The two women clearly stand for different things: Passavant long ago thought they represented ‘noble inspiration’ and ‘the pleasures of life’ respectively.

Though not in any sense an illustration of either tale, the imagery of this work is chiefly informed by two well-known classical texts. Underlying the whole iconography is the celebrated parable invented by Prodicus of Ceos, a Greek philosopher of the fifth century BC, as reported by Xenophon (*Memorabilia*, II.1, 21–34). This tells of Hercules’s encounter, at the brink of manhood, with two women – female personifications – at a crossroads, at which the hero has to decide how to live his life, to climb Virtue’s rocky road or to follow Pleasure’s easier path. It has been suggested that Raphael found a visual source for his composition in a woodcut – like the painting, square – of *Hercules at the Crossroads* published in the 1497 Latin version of Sebastian Brant’s *Stultifera navis* (*Ship of Fools*).⁵ Hercules, an armed figure, is shown asleep. Virtue and Pleasure stand on little hummocks on either side, appearing to him in a dream. The parallels are not close, but supporting the connection with Prodicus’s story is the division in the landscape in Raphael’s panel. This divide is rendered more subtly than in what was to become the standardised iconography of this subject (it is worth remembering that it had not yet achieved the popularity it would later). Unquestionably, however, one road leads from the crossroads below the arm of ‘Virtue’ on the left towards to an imposing crag and castle. To the right are gently undulating blue hills, framing the view of a lake or inlet into which juts what might be a causeway but is more probably a covered pier – an embarking point. The landscape is loosely derived from Netherlandish pictures and perhaps, for the cluster of houses in the middle ground, from German prints.⁶



(actual size)

Raphael's knight is not, however, a conventional Hercules; he has none of the demi-god's usual identifying attributes. Panofsky introduced a further connection with the story of the vision of Scipio Africanus. He demonstrated that the dialogue between Virtue (*Virtus*) and Pleasure (*Voluptas*) inserted by Jacob Locher in the Latin version of the *Stultifera navis* had incorporated phrases from Silius Italicus's *Punica* (xv). This text had been rediscovered by Florentine humanist Poggio Bracciolini in 1417 and was first published in 1471; it would have been immediately recognisable to an educated audience. It told of the choice of Scipio in a narrative obviously informed by the tale of the Hercules's quandary: 'These anxious thoughts filled the young man's mind as he sat beneath the green shadow of a bay-tree that grew behind the dwelling; and suddenly two figures, far exceeding mortal stature, flew down from the sky and stood to right and left of him: Virtue was on one side and Pleasure, the enemy of Virtue, on the other. Pleasure's head breathed Persian odours, and her ambrosial tresses flowed free; in her shining robe Tyrian purple was embroidered with ruddy gold; the pin in her hair gave studied beauty to her brow; and her roving, wanton eyes shot forth flame upon flame. The appearance of the other was far different: her hair, seeking no borrowed charm from ordered locks, grew freely above the forehead; her eyes were steady; in face and gait she was more like a man; she showed cheerful modesty; and her tall stature was set off by the snow-white robe she wore.' Virtue promises Scipio honour, fame and glory through

victory in war – but cautions that the road to her chaste mountain dwelling is steep and stony. Pleasure counters with the offer of a life of peaceful serenity. Scipio, like Hercules, chose the more arduous path, strengthened in his resolution as a result of this experience to become leader of the Roman forces in Spain.

One key detail in the picture fits Silius's narrative precisely – the bay-tree. It should be noted, however, that as well as reinforcing a connection with this particular text, laurel was a valuable insertion for its range of associations with both valour and poetry. Other details in the poem accord less well, especially the relative scales of the central human protagonist and the visionary beings, the dress and manly physique of Virtue, and the fact that her ostensible counterpart, Pleasure, is less modestly attired than in the painting. Silius Italicus, moreover, describes a vision. The idea that Scipio is dreaming may derive from another distinguished source, Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* and Macrobius's commentary upon it, the latter printed no fewer than four times before 1501. There the dream is different, however.

Even if this not a straightforward visual rendition of the passage in Silius Italicus's poem, Raphael's dreaming knight is undeniably characterised to resemble so many of the young Greek and Roman historical heroes depicted in Central Italy in these years. There is nothing to contradict his identification as Scipio, even if he can represent (as Scipio himself could in literature) a more general ideal of youthful male nobility. Cecil Gould compared him to the Scipio in Perugino's fresco in the Collegio del Cambio, Perugia (1499–1500). He also

has much in common with the exemplary ancients, including Scipio (cat. 67), painted for a Sieneese palace in the early 1490s. Scipio had been celebrated as an archetypal poetic hero in the Middle Ages, as the saviour of Rome and a model of chastity, by Dante and, after him, at considerable length, by Petrarch, who made him the hero of his epic Latin poem *Africa*, started in 1338. This was first printed in Venice in 1501, and it too probably informed (though less directly) the iconography of Raphael's painting. Aldo Bernardo has discussed Petrarch's conversion of two historical figures, his beloved Laura and the Roman general, into figures of high poetry.⁷ If Raphael's knight is indeed Scipio (or a version of him), he too has been 'poetically' transformed.

One key part of Raphael's translation is the elimination of the idea that the knight should make a choice. Cecil Gould considered that the women stand for complementary attributes rather than antagonistic ones and Carol Plazzotta sees Raphael as 'representing the double visitation not in terms of a moral dilemma, but rather as a convergence of all the qualities to which an ideal knight or soldier should aspire'.⁸ The figure of 'Pleasure' is evidently not the immoral temptress of these stories, and it may be that we should rethink both ladies' identifications. The women were alternatively, though still somewhat abstractly, identified as Pallas Athena and Venus by André Chastel. Still arguing that the picture's iconography assumed a moral decision, he wrote: 'the knight Scipio has to choose, not so much between Good and Evil, as between two principles of conduct, Venus and Pallas,

Fig. 73
 Raphael (1483–1520)
The Three Graces, about 1504
 Oil on panel, 17 × 17 cm
 Musée Condé, Chantilly (38)



the way of worldly satisfaction and the way of a higher order'.⁹ Once again, these would not be conventional depictions of the two goddesses. The book and sword held by the woman on the left are, however, perfectly acceptable (though not standard) attributes for Pallas or Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and warfare. This was a now established pairing to signal the double virtues of the righteous, educated warrior-prince, whose tutelary goddess was Minerva.¹⁰ On the other hand, the flower held out by the woman on the right seems to be myrtle, a plant sacred to Venus – and to marriage.

The issue of the identity of the woman on the right may be somewhat clarified by considering the relationship of the *Dream of a Knight* to the Chantilly *Three Graces* (fig. 73). Though the two pictures are often thought to have formed a diptych, the marginally smaller size and larger figures of the *Three Graces* make it more likely that the Chantilly panel was the cover for the London picture.¹¹ The smaller panel is slightly more loosely painted and the landscape simpler. These factors suggest that it was intended to be seen from further off, perhaps displayed on a wall. Thus the *Dream of a Knight* could only have been inspected at the distance demanded by its detailed painting once the cover had been removed. Sometimes individuated in the Renaissance as Chastity, Beauty and Love, here the identities of the Graces merge. It may be significant that all three wear coral in their hair and in two cases round their necks. It has already been noted that coral beads constitute the second attribute of the 'other woman' in *The Dream of a Knight*. This motif links her explicitly to the Graces,

who were thought of as the companions of Venus, and were so described in Petrarch's *Africa* (III, 265–8): '... mark [Venus's] company / three naked girls: the first averts her eyes, / and all have snowy arms entwined in sweet / reciprocal embrace...'.¹² Coral may have been chosen since it, like Venus, emerged from the sea (though there is seemingly no contemporary source that confirms this association); and there is a body of water behind this figure in Raphael's picture. No matter what its precise connotations, by wearing coral, Raphael's Venus (or, better perhaps, what Paul Holberton has termed a 'Venereal personification') is seen by the juxtaposition of the two pictures to embody all three qualities associated with the Graces.¹³

For if virtue (represented by Pallas or a 'Palladian personification') constituted a knight's chief weapon, female beauty was his prize and inspiration. Together they represented aspects of love. The point was made explicitly in one of Dante's most beautiful and evocative sonnets, here given in a pleasing translation by Dante Gabriel Rossetti ('Of Beauty and Duty'):

Two ladies to the summit of my mind
 Have clomb, to hold an argument of love.
 The one has wisdom with her from above,
 For every noblest virtue well design'd:
 The other, beauty's tempting power refined
 And the high charm of perfect grace approve:
 And I, as my sweet Master's will doth move,
 At feet of both their favours am reclined.
 Beauty and Duty in my soul keep strife,
 At question if the heart such course can take
 And 'twixt two ladies hold its love complete.
 The fount of gentle speech yields answer meet,
 That Beauty may be loved for gladness' sake,
 And duty in the lofty ends of life.¹⁴

In many ways, this poem seems as important a literary source for the picture as any identified previously.

Other poetry in the *volgare* was important for Raphael and he must have been especially inspired by his own father's example. Giovanni Santi had written a long poem celebrating the life and deeds of his patron the Duke of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro, and the prologue, '*una visione in somno*' (a vision in sleep), is a version of the Choice of Hercules or Scipio. In it, the poet falls asleep under the shade of a beech tree

Fig. 74
 Benvenuto di Giovanni (1436–about 1509) probably
 with Girolamo di Benvenuto (1470–1524)
Hercules at the Crossroads, 1500
 Tempera on panel, 87 cm diameter (with original frame)
 Galleria Franchetti, Ca' d'Oro, Venezia (87)



and is exhorted to abandon a life of pleasure and to pursue instead a new harsh road leading up a bare cliff to the temple of Apollo and the Muses. Giovanni Santi's poem was used as evidence by Baudissin to establish a link between the present work and the court at Urbino, suggesting that Raphael's patron should be found there.¹⁵ His theory is not impossible, but Panofsky's earlier suggestion that the picture should be connected with an event in the life of Scipione di Tommaso Borghesi (b. 1493) remains perhaps more plausible. It is certainly the case that Scipio (or in Italian, Scipione) was a much-used name in Siena in these circles. Apart from this young Borghesi, another member of the clan was baptised Scipione Africano Vittorio (the son of Alessandro di Ambrogio Borghesi) a year later, and one Scipione Chigi was born in 1507.¹⁶ But this fact shows only that the hero had a particular status in the city, rather than that the picture was necessarily painted for someone with that name. If it was made for a member of the Borghesi family or for another Siennese patrician, it was probably sent to Siena from Perugia, since the panel is correctly dated on stylistic grounds to around 1504 (though it is just possible that Raphael made a return trip to Siena in 1504).

Santi's prologue is a good example of a contemporary poem that exploited its readers' assumed familiarity with ancient literary precedent to arrive at a variation on the theme. Raphael's *Dream of a Knight* is its pictorial equivalent and one that employed a similar tactic. The visual strands that fed into this image and its cover were, with only one crucial exception, modern. However, it is striking how many of them

can be associated with Siena, showing that the web of allusion contained in the two works would best be understood there. Tellingly, for example, the *Three Graces* copies the sculptural group set up in the Piccolomini Library (which is believed, on the basis of a copy drawing, to have been studied by Raphael).¹⁷ They recur often in the art produced in the Siena in the first decade of the fifteenth century, quoted by artists rather in the way that they had cited Simone Martini's *Porta Camollia Assumption* fresco (see pp. 106–7). They can represent Concord, but also Love, featuring twice in the Petrucci *camera bella*, once on the ceiling and once in a carved wooden pilaster (cat. 83).

The particularly high status accorded to Scipio Africanus in Siena is further demonstrated by the unusually large number of scenes from his life painted in the years around 1500. The youthful Scipio makes frequent appearances in Siennese domestic paintings. He is to be found not only in the series of virtuous men and women mentioned above (cat. 67), but also in two *spalliera* sequences by Bernardino Fungai. In particular, the pair of *spalliera* panels

in Saint Petersburg (Hermitage)¹⁸ and Moscow (Pushkin Museum),¹⁹ painted probably just before the turn of the century, in which Scipio's dress is rather like that of Raphael's knight, also have their textual sources in Silius Italicus and Petrarch. The Continence of Scipio, the episode in which he proved his chastity, remained a particularly popular subject; this was the story for the lost fresco by Pintoricchio for the Petrucci *camera bella* (see cat. 102–7), used again a decade or so later for a *spalliera* painting by Beccafumi (Pinacoteca, Lucca).

These visual sources are combined with images of Hercules at the Crossroads, and it is again revealing that one of the earliest paintings to survive with this subject is also Siennese. A properly youthful Hercules is depicted torn between Virtue and Pleasure in the *desco da parto* (birth tray) made in 1500 in connection with the marriage between Girolamo de' Vieri and Caterina Tancredi by Benvenuto di Giovanni, probably with the assistance of his son (fig. 74).²⁰ As in the *Dream of a Knight*, the landscape is divided. Virtue's road is not just rocky, it is also populated by (rather docile-looking) lions;

Pleasure's acolytes – or victims – can be seen frolicking behind her in a river, where the dress code seemingly only allows the wearing of a straw hat. The women's contrasting costumes in this work also anticipate Raphael's picture. Again, this theme recurred in Siena, found in the charming panel of about 1510 attributed to Pacchiarotti in the Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest in which the young Hercules is clearly asleep, and in frescoes and panels by Beccafumi – the roundel in the Palazzo Venturi (now Bindi-Sergardi), where the Three Graces also appear; and a *spalliera* in the Museo Bardini, Florence. There were even equivalents in Siena for the poetic reworking of the motif of the mountainous road to virtue, and the human capacity to choose it: this seems to be the message behind Francesco di Giorgio's mysterious drawing of a young man in a landscape (cat. 41). One of the inlaid marble pavements in Siena Cathedral, designed by Pintoricchio, contains an elaborate allegory of the Mountain of Wisdom, in which the female personification of Sapienza holds a book (and a victor's palm).²¹ Even the poet-knight presented as a dreamer has a precedent in Benvenuto's Detroit *casone* panel in which the central protagonist adopts what had already become the standard dreaming pose (pp. 50–1, fig. 24).

This deliberate conflation of sources – textual and pictorial – shows that the mysteries of a certain rare category of picture, including this one, were deliberately obscure. There is no code to be cracked – nor any single literary source that would provide a complete explanation. All its parts are potentially multivalent, and can be linked together in an almost unlimited number of ways. The book, for example,

could be an emblem of wisdom, but it could also represent poetry. The coral may be associated not only with Venus but also with Pallas; coral was considered her gift to the world, described by Ovid as seaweed transformed by the blood flowing from the head of the decapitated Medusa.²² Pictures, by their nature, may perhaps uniquely be made subject to these kinds of associative readings. If, in Santi's poem, the dreaming hero was turned into the poet, one of the points of Raphael's picture is that the knight can also be taken to stand for the painter himself. Johannes Röll has written: 'The depiction of the dream is the subject of the painting . . .'. The dream therefore represents Raphael's own ability to depict the imaginary, the visionary, himself inspired by both Beauty and Duty – indeed by Love itself. LS

- 1 Henry 2004.
- 2 Panofsky 1930b; Van Lohuizen-Mulder 1977.
- 3 See C. Plazzotta in Chapman, Henry and Plazzotta 2004, pp. 142–3, cat. 36.
- 4 C. Plazzotta in Chapman, Henry and Plazzotta 2004, p. 138.
- 5 First suggested by de Maulde de Clavière 1897; elaborated by Panofsky (1930b).
- 6 Some of these elements were changed, added or particularised after the cartoon was drawn – the crossroads under the arm of the woman on the right, the species of flower held by her opposite, her coral beads, and even the specific tree type under which the knight reclines.
- 7 Bernardo 1962, p. ix.
- 8 Gould 1975; C. Plazzotta in Chapman, Henry and Plazzotta 2004, p. 138.
- 9 Chastel 1959, p. 252.
- 10 Associated with both Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan (in his medal by Pisanello), and, especially, Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino. The theme is explored in Brink 2000.
- 11 Jones and Penny 1983, p. 8; Dülberg 1990, pp. 137–43.
- 12 Bergin and Wilson 1977, p. 49.
- 13 Holberton 1984, pp. 149–82, esp. p. 152.
- 14 Rossetti 1861, pp. 249–50. The connection with this sonnet was first pointed out by Andrew Unger after the display of the picture in the 2004 exhibition, *Raphael: From Urbino to Rome*, email correspondence

to the author, 19 June 2006. For the original text see Dante 1967, pp. 146–9, no. 71 (B.LXXXVI):

*Due donne in cima de la mente mia
venute sono a ragionar d'amore:
l'una ha in sé cortesia e valore,
prudenza e onestà in compagnia;
l'altra ha bellezza e vaga leggiadra,
adorna gentilezza le fa onore:
e io, merzé del dolce mio signore,
mi sto a piè de la lor signoria.*

*Parlan Bellezza e Virtù a l'intelletto,
e fan quistion come un cor puote stare
intra due donne con amor perfetto.*

*Risponde il fonte del gentil parlare
ch'amar si può bellezza per diletto,
e puossi amar virtù per operare.*

- 15 Baudissin 1936.
- 16 It has been thought that a set of panels with episodes from the life of Scipio by Bernardino Fungai was executed for his birth: see A. Labriola in Boskovits 1991, p. 40. More recently it has been pointed out that the probable 1490s date for the pictures makes this unlikely: see M. Caciorgna in Santi and Strinati 2005, pp. 189–92, cat. 2, 11–13, esp. p. 192. For Scipione Africano Vittorio see M. Caciorgna, "Salebrosum scandite montem" Contributo all'esegesi iconografica del Monte della Sapienza na; Pavimento del Duomo di Siena: tonti letterarie classiche ed umanistiche' in Caciorgna, Guerrini and Lorenzoni 2006, p. 113, note 71.
- 17 This drawing in the Venice Sketchbook of the Piccolomini *Graces* is discussed in Syson (forthcoming).
- 18 Kustodieva 1994, p. 175, no. 90.
- 19 Markova 2002, pp. 251–3, no. 151. For a definition of *spalliera* paintings see cat. 62–4.
- 20 Bandera 1999, pp. 196, 198, 199, 244, no. 86.
- 21 See M. Caciorgna, 'La navata centrale' in Caciorgna and Guerrini 2003, pp. 64–82.
- 22 Geronimus 2006, p. 115. Albertus Magnus thought that coral promoted wisdom.

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Panofsky 1930, pp. 37–82, 142–50; J. Röll, "Do we affect fashion in the grave?": Italian and Spanish Tomb Sculptures and the Pose of the Dreamer' in Mann and Syson 1998, pp. 154–64, esp. p. 158; C. Plazzotta in Chapman, Henry and Plazzotta 2004, pp. 138–41, cat. 35; J. Meyer zur Capellen in Coliva 2006, pp. 114–5, cat. 4.