

**‘ALMA DIVA LEGGIADRA SIMONETTA’:
CULTURE AND POLITICS IN LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF
SIMONETTA CATTANEO VESPUCCI**

by

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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September 2010**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines literary representations of the noblewoman Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci (c. 1453- 1476) written in the Florentine vernacular in the mid- 1470s and 1480s. Composed during the reign of Lorenzo de' Medici, *de facto* ruler of Florence from 1469- 1492, these portrayals of Simonetta, in Angelo Poliziano's *Stanze*, Lorenzo's *Comento de' miei sonetti*, and works by Bernardo Pulci, Luigi Pulci, Girolamo Benivieni and an anonymous poet, respond to the city's interest in both its vernacular and classical roots, and its changing political landscape. In my thesis I argue that Simonetta is the means through which a new ideal of femininity is created that reflects these developments and becomes symbolic of them, combining the beauty and virtue of the female figures of Stilnovistic and Petrarchan poetry with attributes inspired by ancient literature, philosophy and mythology. Due to her 'relationship' with Giuliano de' Medici, she is also a useful tool for praising the family in verse and winning their favour, in a city controlled by Lorenzo's patronage networks. Moreover, she allows Lorenzo to portray himself as a just and wise ruler. In addition, her links with Naples mean that she becomes part of Florence's policy of cultural diplomacy towards the city.

DEDICATION

To my family and to Robin, for all their love and support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Ita Mac Carthy, who has been an unfailing source of inspiration and support since I first expressed an interest in researching Italian Renaissance poetry in 2008. My co-supervisor, David Hemsoll, has also provided me with a good deal of food for thought regarding Simonetta's role in the visual arts, which, although not central to this thesis, will be invaluable to my PhD.

I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the University of Birmingham and the School of Languages, Cultures, Art History and Music, who awarded me vital financial support via a School Scholarship, and funded my research trip to Florence in June 2010.

I would also like to extend my especial thanks to Padre Emilio Panella, archivist at the convent of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, who, with great patience and enthusiasm, dedicated hours of his time to helping me transcribe Tommaso Sardi's self-commentary on his *De Anima Peregrina*. The staff at the Biblioteca Riccardiana, also in Florence, were similarly welcoming and supportive. In addition, I am grateful to Stefano Carrai and Monika Schmitter for sending me copies of their respective articles on Simonetta, and to Judith Bryce for making me aware of her own work on Simonetta.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends at the University of Birmingham and beyond for their encouragement and advice, and, above all, my family and Robin, who have provided me with so much love and support, not to mention proof-reading, over the years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One	23
‘Un non so che divino’:	
Simonetta in Poliziano’s <i>Stanze</i>	
Introduction	23
The creation of a new ideal of femininity	26
Simonetta and the Medici	39
The ‘flourishing’ of Florence	46
Conclusion	50
Chapter Two	52
‘O chiara stella’:	
Simonetta in Lorenzo de’ Medici’s <i>Comento de’ miei sonetti</i>	
Introduction	52
Simonetta as a ‘patriotic’ figure	55
Simonetta as a political creation	65
Simonetta as iconic	70
Conclusion	75

Chapter Three	76
‘Quante penne stracharsi inchiostri et carte’:	
Simonetta in the works of ‘minor’ Florentine poets	
Introduction	76
The creation of a new ideal of femininity?	78
Simonetta and the Medici?	85
The ‘flourishing’ of Florence?	91
Simonetta as a patriotic figure?	93
Simonetta as a political creation?	96
Simonetta as iconic?	99
Conclusion	101
Conclusion	103
Bibliography	109

INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on poetic representations of Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci (c. 1453-1476), the daughter of exiled Ligurian aristocrats who passed the latter stages of her life in the Florence of Lorenzo de' Medici, *de facto* ruler of the city from 1469- 1492. Simonetta merits the attention of scholars of early Renaissance culture and society for a number of compelling reasons. Firstly, between the years of 1475 and 1515 she was written about in both Latin and the Tuscan vernacular by no less than thirteen poets. The texts that can be connected to her with certainty include, most famously, Angelo Poliziano's *Stanze Cominciate per la Giostra del Magnifico Giuliano di Piero de' Medici*, the influential poet and scholar's celebration of the victory of Giuliano de' Medici, younger brother of Lorenzo, in the joust held in Piazza Santa Croce on 29 January 1475. In this unfinished mini-epic in the *volgare*, Simonetta is the central female figure and *innamoratrice* of Giuliano, whose chaste love he vows to win by claiming victory in a joust. Lorenzo de' Medici, also a highly regarded poet in his day, composed four sonnets to commemorate her death in April 1476, which he later reworked as the 'Argomento' section of his *Comento de' miei sonetti*. Here, Simonetta, unnamed but identifiable, is presented as the virtuous and beautiful object of general Florentine mourning, and as leading the poet to an understanding of the divine nature of love. The bulk of the 'minor' poems on Simonetta were composed in the wake of her death, by both Florentines and 'foreigners'. Works in the vernacular were produced by Lorenzo's childhood friend Luigi Pulci, by his brother, Bernardo, by Girolamo Benivieni, musician, poet and rising star in Medici circles, by the Veronese poet Francesco Nursio Timdeo, and an anonymous poet. At the same time, the Constantinople-born poet Michele Marullo, the Pistoian poet and cleric Tommaso Baldinotti, the Florentine humanist Naldo Naldi, Piero di

Francesco Dovizi da Bibbiena, who was later to become Lorenzo's private secretary and his sons' tutor, Alessandro Cortesi, Medicean and childhood friend of Poliziano, and Poliziano himself were composing works on Simonetta in Latin. She had not been forgotten, moreover, as late as 1515, when Tommaso Sardi, a Dominican monk resident in the convent of Santa Maria Novella, completed his commentary on his Dantean religious epic, *De Anima Peregrina*¹, in which Simonetta appears. In addition, the series of Latin elegies composed c. 1475 by the Rimanesi poet Giovanni Aurelio Augurelli under the title *Amica ad magnanimum Iulianum Medicem*², in which the 'amica' fears for Giuliano's safety in the joust and then celebrates his victory, could refer to Simonetta (Farina 2001: 71-73). Moreover, a series of sonnets, purportedly composed by Giuliano de' Medici on the death of a lady, have also been connected to her (Farina 2001: 117-125)³. Given that, according to a manuscript owned by the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Simonetta was 'oggetto continuo e palese delle sue amorse poesie' (transcribed by Farina 2001: 31-34)⁴, this may not be unlikely. The fact that Simonetta was so widely written about is interesting in itself, begging all sorts of questions about who she was and how she could have inspired so many to write in her honour. Yet there is more at stake here, since the majority of these works were composed in the early years of Lorenzo's unofficial rule over Florence (1469-1492), suggesting that Simonetta can tell us much about the political and cultural developments of the day, such as the rise of Florence's *volgare*.

¹ 'Concerning the journeying soul'

² 'Girl friend [potentially in both senses] to the Magnificent Giuliano de' Medici'.

³ Given the uncertainty of both subject matter and attribution, these sonnets will not be considered in this thesis.

⁴ Unfortunately, beyond citing the anonymous manuscript as 'Mss. Passerini, cart. 176', Farina gives no details as to the manuscript's date or context beyond the fact that it deals with the life of Piero Vespucci, Simonetta's father-in-law.

Beyond the poems written about her, a number of myths have become inextricably linked to Simonetta. Firstly, a great deal of attention has been given to her supposed 'love affair' with Giuliano de' Medici. Although the *Stanze* and the verses addressed to Giuliano following her death make it clear that there was some kind of connection between the two, we cannot be sure of its real nature. As Bryce puts it, 'the relationship may have had a basis in personal attachment, whether mutual or on the part of Giuliano alone, or it may have been more of a socio-cultural or literary fiction, reaching its apotheosis in Giuliano's joust of 29 January 1475' (2002: 19). Despite these uncertainties, and the doubts expressed by scholars such as Bryce, Simonetta has gone down in history as Giuliano's 'lover', whether or not in deed as well as in sentiment, and has often been portrayed as the heroine of a tragic love story. The fact that Simonetta, still young and beautiful, died at the age of 23, only a year after the 1475 joust (possibly of consumption, that most clichéd of diseases) only adds to her attraction for contemporary writers. As Carrai puts it, she has become 'il tipo della giovane fermata per sempre nel fiore della bellezza dalla morte precoce' (2007: 94), comparable to contemporary icons like Marilyn Monroe, Rita Hayworth and even Princess Diana of Windsor. Indeed, Vannucci goes so far as to define her as an 'eroina romantica in anteprima' (2004: 14). This 'legend' of love and loss is lent an extra frisson by Giuliano's conveniently-timed assassination in the Pazzi Conspiracy, two years to the day after Simonetta's death. Moreover, Lorenzo's laudatory portrayal of Simonetta in his *Comento* has, despite his own assertions to the contrary, led some to believe that both brothers were in love with her (for example, Farina 2001: 50). This all makes Simonetta extremely interesting from the point of view of Renaissance ideas of perfect womanhood, and of iconicity in general.

The most enduring myth of ‘la bella Simonetta’, as she has often been termed⁵, is that she was the muse of a variety of visual artists, Sandro Botticelli in particular. This legend began to gain popularity with the Victorian ‘rediscovery’ of Botticelli⁶, inspired by Vasari’s assertion, in the 1568 version of his ‘Vita di Sandro Botticello’, that a portrait by the artist of the ‘inamorata’ of Giuliano was to be found in the *studiolo* of Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici (1971: 519). Both Pater and Ruskin, for example, identify Simonetta in various paintings by Botticelli. The former, writing in 1870, vaguely connects Simonetta with any number of Botticelli’s Venus and Madonna figures, and states that she appears as Judith, Justice and *Veritas*⁷ (1986: 39). The latter’s essay ‘Ariadne Florentina’ contains a note by a Mr Tyrwhitt claiming that Simonetta appears not only in a portrait tenuously associated with her in the Pitti Palace, but also in *Spring*, *The Birth of Venus*, *The Calumny of Apelles* and in Botticelli’s frescoes for the Sistine Chapel (1906 [1872]: 483). Aby Warburg’s 1893 work, ‘Sandro Botticelli’s *Geburt der Venus* und *Frühling*’⁸, transformed these somewhat arbitrary judgements into reasoned, scholarly theory. For Warburg, the *Stanze*’s depiction of the *Birth of Venus* is so similar to that of Botticelli that they must surely be linked. He argues that both are interpretations of the ‘Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite’, with the poet explaining the concept to the painter (1966: 8- 9). According to Warburg, Poliziano was also Botticelli’s adviser for *Spring*, encouraging the latter to employ the same Lucretian and Ovidian source materials used by the poet in works such as the *Stanze* and the *Rusticus* (43). Warburg goes on to identify Simonetta with the figure of the ‘goddess of spring’ in both paintings, noting their correspondence to certain phrases in Poliziano’s depiction

⁵ This has become Simonetta’s most common epithet in recent years. However, I have so far found only one example of its use in fifteenth-century literature, and even that appears more descriptive than titular (‘[...] ch’i’ gli ho nel cor diritta una saetta/ dagli occhi della bella Simonetta’, *Stanze*. II. 10. 7-8).

⁶ See Levey 1960 for a detailed account of Botticelli’s role in nineteenth-century England.

⁷ In *Judith’s Return to Bethulia*, *Fortitude*, and the *Calumny of Apelles*.

⁸ ‘Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and *Spring*’.

of Simonetta (47- 48). Despite the best efforts of Herbert Horne to demonstrate that no real evidence links Simonetta to any of these paintings (1908: 52- 54), the myth has had an enormous impact on the way in which both Simonetta and Botticelli are perceived. Numerous interpretations of the legend continue to appear. The artist's supposed 'love' for Simonetta has also been the subject of a number of works of historical fiction, from Maurice Hewlett's 1895 *Quattrocentisteria: How Sandro Botticelli Saw Simonetta in the Spring* to Richard Burns' 1992 *Sandro and Simonetta*. Fact or fiction, the myth of Simonetta as the artist's muse has drawn so much critical attention that a more careful assessment of her presence in the art and literature of the period is long overdue. Although her link to the visual arts lies beyond the scope of this thesis (I will, however, deal with it in my PhD), it remains an important context framing my investigation of her appearances in vernacular poetry, since the debate as to her presence in the works of Botticelli has had a great impact on the literary criticism that deals with her.

In reality, we know very little about Simonetta's life. All documents regarding to her birth have been lost or destroyed, although Florence's *catasto* of 1469- 1470 registers the presence of 'Marco di Piero di Giuliano Vespucci età d'anni XVI', her future husband, and 'Simonetta di messer Guasparri Catani sua donna d'anni XVI' in Piero Vespucci's household (Neri 1885: 132), meaning that she must have been born c. 1453. Where exactly this event took place has been the subject of some debate. It is clear from the *Stanze* that she was born somewhere in Liguria⁹, whilst Bernardo Pulci refers to Genova's bereavement at her death¹⁰. Some critics, such as Farina (2001: 14- 17) and Carrai (2007: 89), identify her birthplace as Portovenere, a small coastal town

⁹ '[...] mia natal patria è nella aspra Liguria,/ sovra una costa alla riva marittima,/ ove fuor de' gran massi indarno gemere/ si sente il fer Nettunno e irato fremere' (*Stanze*. I. 51. 5-8).

¹⁰ 'Ov'è tuo albergo isconsolato e solo,/ Genova mesta e tua Cattana prole,/ sol di te degni, lasso, in tanto duolo [...]' ('Venite, sacre e gloriose dive'. 16. 1-3).

to the south of Genova, on the basis of Simonetta's assertion in the *Stanze* that she was born 'in grembo a Venere' (I. 53. 8). Others are equally convinced that the theory is misguided (for example, Martelli 1995: 102; Neri 1885: 132- 133), and believe that she was born in Genova itself. Her parentage is more certain. Her father, Gaspare Cattaneo, was twice nominated *anziano* of the Genovese republic, whilst her mother, Caterina (Cattocchia) Violante Spinola di Obizzo was the widow of Battista Campofregoso, *doge* of Genova for a day in 1437, before her second marriage (Farina 2001: 14; Tognarini 2002: 10). Simonetta's family was forced to flee Liguria when the Campofregoso were exiled from Genova in 1457, following the political unrest that eventually saw Cattocchia's son by her first marriage, and then *doge* of Genova, Pietro Campofregoso, stabbed to death in 1459 (Farina 2001: 24- 25; Tognarini 2002: 10). They found refuge in the Tuscan city of Piombino, whose *signore*, Jacopo III Appiani, was the husband of Battistina Campofregoso, Simonetta's half-sister (Farina 2001: 26; Tognarini 2002: 10). Nothing is known of Simonetta's time in the city until August 1468, when Jacopo granted her a certain amount of iron¹¹ as a dowry for her marriage with Marco Vespucci (cited in Neri 1885: 133), whose father, Piero, a successful merchant and Lorenzo's ambassador in Piombino at the time, had financial links to the Appiani (Farina 2001: 29). No other documentary evidence has survived of the marriage, which took place either later that year or in early 1469 (Farina 2001: 36), and saw Simonetta and her equally young husband take up residence in Piero's house in Florence.

Next to nothing is known about her time in Florence. As Lazzi and Ventrone point out, prior to the 1475 joust there are no records of her presence at any public gathering (2007: 48- 49). There is not even definitive proof that she was at the joust, as no records mention her and

¹¹ The island of Elba, with its iron mines, was part of the dominions of Piombino (see Lazzi & Ventrone 2007: 65-66).

Poliziano's unfinished *Stanze* do not reach the tournament itself. We cannot be certain of the nature of her 'relationships' with any of the men to whom she has been connected, let alone of her feelings towards her husband and Vespucci in-laws. The only fragment of her voice that remains is captured in a letter dated 21 March 1473¹² between Luigi Pulci and Lorenzo de' Medici, in which the poet relays the news of the poisoning of Jacopo III, Battistina and their courtiers, noting that 'la Simonetta dice, è più septimane gli fu detto la sua sorella era morto di questo, et come tutti morrebbero senza manco, chè haveano beuto' (Pulci 1868: 89). As we shall see in the course of this thesis, in poetry Simonetta is frequently described as blonde, beautiful and virtuous, but in the most generalised and stylised of terms, meaning we can gather very little from it about her appearance and character. Moreover, despite the popularity of the myth that associates her with Botticelli and other early Renaissance artists, we cannot be certain that she is depicted in any of the myriad works of art associated with her. We do know that such a portrait existed thanks to a letter from Piero Vespucci to Lucrezia Tornabuoni¹³, dated 12 January 1479, in which he describes how, after Simonetta's death, he and Marco gave all her clothes and her 'immagine' to Giuliano (cited in Farina 2001: 35). Unfortunately, he mentions neither the artist, nor the work's distinguishing features.

In contrast to her life, Simonetta's final illness and death, probably of consumption, pneumonia or another similar disease, is relatively well-documented, thanks to a series of letters that Piero Vespucci sent to Lorenzo de' Medici, then in Pisa, in April 1476. In the first, dated 18 April, Piero informs Lorenzo that 'la Simonetta si sta quasi nelli medesimi termini che quando voi partisti' (all letters transcribed by Farina 2001: 101- 102). In the second, written two days

¹² The Florentine New Year began on 25 March, so 1473 is in effect 1474 here.

¹³ Mother of Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici.

later, he thanks Lorenzo, on behalf of his family and Simonetta's mother, for having sent a doctor, 'maestro Stefano', to care for Simonetta. He goes on to report that she is a little better. The final letter, of 22 April, tells a very different story: Simonetta recovery has been short-lived, and 'maestro Stefano' cannot agree with the Vespucci doctor, 'maestro Moyses', as to what should be done, nor even as to the cause of Simonetta's illness. A letter to Lorenzo, of 27 April, from his agent Sforza Bettini, informs him of her death (transcribed by Neri 1885: 137), and allows us to date it to 26 April, and her funeral to the following day. The latter is described at length by Lorenzo in his *Comento*, on the basis of Bettini's letter and other accounts of it, such as that of Bernardo Pulci¹⁴. If we can trust Lorenzo's second-hand and not necessarily reliable account of the event, Simonetta was carried to her final resting place uncovered, and surrounded by a crowd of weeping Florentines, who were stunned by her beauty in death (*Comento*, 592-593). Florence's *Libro dei morti del 1475- 87* confirms the date, stating simply that 'è morta la Simonetta', and listing her burial place as the church of Ognissanti (transcribed by Farina 2001: 105). The exact location of her tomb is no longer known.

On the other hand, we do know, as we have seen, that a great deal of poetry was written about Simonetta, mainly after her death, and that a number of people were involved with her posthumous transfiguration from mortal woman to poetic ideal. This proliferation of literature has led to a lively scholarly debate about Simonetta, generally focussed on her representations in the *Stanze* and the *Comento*. For Mario Martelli, for example, Simonetta is a 'Neoplatonic key' in both works. In his *Angelo Poliziano: Storia e Metastoria* (1995), he lays out his theory that the *Stanze* follows a strict Neoplatonic scheme, of which Simonetta is a crucial part. He connects her

¹⁴ 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive'. 55. 1-3.

assertion ‘ch’ io nacqui in grembo a Venere’ (I. 53. 8) to Marsilio Ficino’s and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s definition of Venus as a direct emanation of God, and Love as ‘l’anima razionale, la quale, innamorata della bellezza divina, cerca di attingerla mediante operazioni ispirate, per quante terrene, a quell’amore, e perciò buone’ (1995: 104). As Pico della Mirandola puts it, ‘lo amore della bellezza dell’anima’ is not ‘già amore celeste perfettamente, ma perfetta e propinqua immagine di quello’ (104). Simonetta’s identification of herself as the daughter of Venus, therefore, makes her the allegorical figure of the love that the soul feels for divine beauty, or rather for the most perfect image of this beauty that can be found outside the universe’s higher spheres (105). This means that she is also an allegory of earthly, or civil and political, virtues, which are for Ficino synonymous with this kind of love. Martelli reads ‘Iulio’s’ (that is, Giuliano’s) victory in the joust as the young Medici’s first adult, public act, and so as the beginning of his political career. The fact that Simonetta inspires him to carry out this deed confirms for Martelli her identification with a life dedicated to civic virtue, defined by Neoplatonic thinkers as the *vita attiva* (106- 107). Moreover, Simonetta’s presentation of herself in the *Stanze* as a married, nature-loving, church-goer is, according to Martelli, explicable only if read as an allegory of this life (108). In Martelli’s analysis, this means that Simonetta is the second step in Ficino’s *itinerarium mentis in deum*¹⁵. For him, the sensual and appetitive life is represented by the deer that Cupid creates in order to lure Iulio away from his hunting companions so that he can meet Simonetta. Simonetta herself, as we have seen, allegorises the rational and political life. Venus, finally, symbolises the contemplative life of those who have recognised that the source of beauty and love on Earth is God himself (94- 95). They are

¹⁵ ‘The mind’s journey to God’.

manifestations of the same divine light, which shines through them with ever greater intensity (136).

In his 1996 *Letteratura fiorentina del Quattrocento: Il Filtro Degli Anni Sessanta*, Martelli claims that Simonetta has a similar Platonic meaning in Lorenzo's *Comento*. Here, transfigured *post mortem* into the star of Venus, she is not the poet's 'vero e proprio amore', but begins to open his eyes to divine love and a higher way of life. She heralds the arrival of his true love, Lucrezia Donati, metaphorically the Sun, and then must die so that this greater light can win through¹⁶ (67). Once more, according to the critic, Simonetta does not represent celestial love and the contemplative life itself, but is its perfect earthly image, and so symbolises 'la seconda fase, quella della vita politica, che deve morire perché egli possa accedere alla terza, alla vita contemplativa' (68). As Martelli puts it in *Studi laurenziani* (1965), 'seppur nel travestimento di un romanzo d'amore, il *Comento* altro non era ed altro non voleva essere che un trattato filosofico' (107).

Paola Ventrone (2007) builds on Martelli's interpretation of Simonetta. For Ventrone, Simonetta, along with Albiera degli Albizzi¹⁷, exemplifies the Neoplatonic idealisation of women in 1470s and 1480s Florence, which saw them figured as nymphs, whose features were the metaphysical embodiment of the philosophy's teachings (29- 30). She reads this as the most obvious sign that Neoplatonism was becoming part of the language of everyday life in Laurentian

¹⁶ Thus explaining the 'real' Simonetta's death, and her connection with the star of Venus (that is, the morning star that is eventually superseded by the Sun).

¹⁷ Another young and beautiful noblewoman, whose death in 1473 at the age of fifteen, a few days before she was due to marry Lorenzo's childhood friend Sigismondo della Stufa, was also commemorated in verse.

circles. According to the critic, in Poliziano's elegy on Albiera¹⁸ the young noblewoman comes to embody the modesty, dignity, chastity and good manners that had been viewed as essential qualities for women in pre-Medicean, oligarchic Florence, thus leaving behind the distinctly risqué behaviour of women such as Marietta degli Strozzi and Lucrezia Donati in the 1460s. Moreover, her shining eyes, symbolic of intelligence and purity, and the fluttering of her long hair and dress, based on ancient models of beauty, mark her out as an invention at once classicising and philosophical (34). For Ventrone, the languages of philosophy, poetry and painting were fused together by Simonetta (40), 'modello eccellente di bellezza neoplatonica' (31), thanks to the joust of 1475. Following the theories of Martelli, she views both the *Stanze* (47) and the *Comento* as illustrating Neoplatonic doctrine on ideal love (40). She is equally convinced that the standard that Botticelli painted for Giuliano for the joust contains a portrait of Simonetta. She also believes that, due to the similar description of Simonetta in the *Stanze* (II. 28), Poliziano must have suggested this theme to Botticelli. For Ventrone, both banner and poem gave the joust 'i caratteri di una psicomachia nella quale, come nella botticelliana *Pallade e il Centauro*, l'intelletto stabiliva il suo completo controllo sui sensi' (47). This means that she does not, like Martelli, think that the joust was intended to mark Giuliano's entry onto the Florentine political scene, since, as the younger brother of Lorenzo, such an investiture was unnecessary (47). Instead, she argues that it made public the cultural changes that were taking place in Laurentian circles, and made clear to Florence's traditional oligarchy that the 'il vecchio linguaggio cavalleresco e romanzo' that they held dear had been superseded by these cultural preferences (47). According to Ventrone, the fact Simonetta became a 'Neoplatonic icon' had

¹⁸ 'In Albieram Albitiam, puellam formosissimam, morientem' ('On the death of Albiera degli Albizzi, a beautiful girl').

little to do with her beauty. Rather, it was brought about by the swiftness of events, which saw her idealised in the joust and then even more so in death, which negated her bodily presence and personality (47- 48). Since her face ‘idealizzato a partire dallo stendardo del ’75, rimbalzò come un’ossessione nella pittura del Botticelli’, she became, Ventrone argues, far more visible after her death than before it (48- 49).

Storey (2003), by contrast, argues that the *Stanze* contain nothing so schematically Neoplatonic. For Storey, although Poliziano must have been influenced by Ficino to some degree, since they moved in similar circles and were both part of the Medici household, there is only one image in the *Stanze* that comes directly from the works of Ficino. This means that attempts to demonstrate that Platonic philosophy was the major influence on the poem are flawed from the outset (603). ‘Rather than approaching the intellectual and literary relationship between Ficino’s textual philosophical doctrines and Poliziano’s poetic fragment as a direct one, we should read the poetry in the “indirect” cultural context of Poliziano’s reception of Ficino’s aesthetic principles and his application of them to a work of poetic art’ (604), she argues. For example, Ficino admired vernacular verse by authors such as Cavalcanti, Dante and Petrarch for what he viewed as their combination of art and philosophy, thereby validating the importance of the Tuscan poetic tradition (606). Since poetry, according to these theories, had to elevate the cultural tradition, which in the case of late *Quattrocento* Florence was both vernacular and classical, the two needed to be combined in a suitably grand, philosophical style (606). The *Stanze*’s synthesis of Florentine and ancient material, Storey argues, is superlative in this respect (606). Ficino, moreover, favoured ‘mysterious’ language, which conveyed a deeper, philosophical meaning to those who had the ability to perceive it (607). Such significance can be

found in the *Stanze* in Poliziano's uses of mythological imagery and exquisitely beautiful language, particularly since Ficino emphasised the moral value of beauty, due to its power to allow the beholder to contemplate the divine beauty of God. The influence of Ficino on Poliziano is felt in these features of the poem, rather than in seemingly Ficinian depictions of ideal love, whose origin is in the 'general Platonic concepts' on which stilnovistic and Petrarchan love poetry were based, and which Poliziano imitates heavily (610). His depiction of Simonetta is therefore mostly founded on Petrarchan notions of ideal beauty, 'enriched' with references both to other works of vernacular literature and to classical texts (611). She is, for Iulio, a Laura-figure in both her appearance and the ennobling effect of the love that she inspires in him (612). At the same time, the fact that she fits so closely into the Tuscan tradition of the *donna di gentil cor* reflects Ficino's high regard for the Platonic and philosophical elements of vernacular literature (612).

Orvieto (2009), on the other hand, denies that Poliziano had any interest in Neoplatonism, stating that he was far more interested in Aristotelianism (24). In this reading of the *Stanze*, the poem has no ideological framework of any kind, lacks coherency (248), and is a work of empty bravura (275). This is particularly felt, Orvieto argues, in Poliziano's presentation of Simonetta, whom he defines as schizophrenic due to the way in which she is first associated with Venus and love, and then with Pallas Athena and chastity (248). For the critic, there is nothing to bind together these different aspects of her character (246). Moreover, he states that there are almost no links between Simonetta's portrayals in the *Stanze* and in the *Comento*, arguing that the only trait that associates them is the way in which they dissociate her from the 'real' woman (249). There can be no other connection between them, he claims, since Lorenzo's Simonetta belongs to

another symbolic dimension, in which she becomes the pale, human reflection of divine beauty (249- 250).

For Greene (1982), by contrast, the *Stanze* are the greatest poetic work of the *Quattrocento* (155), responsible for the creation of a new form of poetry in the *volgare* that combined the influence of classical and vernacular literature in order to establish the ‘syncretic verbal imagination’ necessary to the formation of ‘a viable Italian voice’ (156). The *Stanze*, Greene argues, are a masterpiece of the eclecticism that Poliziano insisted was the best form of *imitatio* in his famous 1485 letter to Paolo Cortesi (156). Greene praises the work for the way in which its subtle combination of intertextual references makes it ‘a kind of alchemical quintessence of the European poetic tradition’. Nevertheless, he insists that it has ‘no sense of a modern sensibility or moral style into which the past is reborn’ (158). Simonetta, once more, is seen as emblematic both of the poem’s successes and of its failures. On the one hand, Greene lauds the intricacy of allusion with which Poliziano creates Simonetta, her near-miraculous appearance in the poem courtesy of Cupid, and the fact that her ‘aura’ is at once ‘virginal, nymphlike, even immortal’ (161- 162). She is the product of so many different sources, from Theocritus to Boccaccio, that she is timeless (168). At the same time, in embodying the ‘integrating structure’ of Poliziano’s imitation, defined here as the poet’s ‘artistic response to his own historical solitude’, she becomes, in Greene’s opinion, a talisman against his ‘estrangement’ from the glories of the past (168- 169).

Bryce (2002) is more interested in Simonetta’s political significance in Lorenzo’s sonnets on her death and their later reworking in the *Comento*. She rejects the suggestion that the ruler and poet was inspired by love for Simonetta, or by any other kind of sentimental attachment to

her (11). Instead, she focuses on the noblewoman's connections to the complex relationship between Florence and Naples in the 1470s and 1480s, and to Lorenzo's policy of cultural diplomacy towards his powerful Aragonese allies (11). Bryce points out that Simonetta was connected to Naples via her brother-in-law Jacopo III Appiani, who also went by the name d'Aragona, since his father, Emanuele, had married an illegitimate daughter of the king of Naples (15- 16). The Vespucci family, moreover, had business and diplomatic dealings with both Jacopo and the Neapolitan court (17- 18). Bryce notes, too, the political elements of the 1475 joust, in which Giuliano fought on a horse provided by King Ferrante of Naples (19). She therefore interprets Lorenzo's provision of a doctor for the dying Simonetta as primarily motivated by political, diplomatic and economic concerns related to Florence's deteriorating relationship with Naples in 1476 (19- 20). In conjunction with these changing circumstances, Lorenzo sent an anthology of verse to Federico d'Aragona, younger son of Ferrante (20- 22). Known as the *Raccolta Aragonesa*, it contained all four of Lorenzo's sonnets on Simonetta, prominently placed at the beginning and end of its concluding section (21). The overall aim of the work was to stress the supremacy of Florence's literary heritage. Simonetta as presented by Lorenzo, Bryce argues, is therefore part of the Medici ruler's policy of cultural propaganda towards Naples. The critic asserts, furthermore, that the *Comento*, and Simonetta's role within it, should also be read in this light. The 1480s, she points out, saw the reconstruction of a 'special relationship' between Florence and Naples, following Giuliano's death in the Pazzi Conspiracy and the ensuing war that saw the two cities fight on opposite sides (25). Bryce observes that Lorenzo's decision to reuse his sonnets on Simonetta 'represented a deliberate reappropriation of, and reinvestment in, a woman whose father-in-law had come under suspicion in the immediate aftermath of the conspiracy, and whose nephew, Jacopo IV Appiani, had fought on the Neapolitan side in the

ensuing war', but who was also connected to more positive developments, such as Semiramide Appiani's¹⁹ eventual marriage to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici in 1482 (26- 27). Bryce concludes that while both women had, in life, fulfilled their duty as 'objects of exchange in the negotiation of relationships and alliances among men', the 'post-mortem literary exploitation of Simonetta had the potential to achieve very similar ends' (27).

As can be seen from the above, the critical literature that has so far been written on Simonetta provides many useful starting points for my own research. For example, the close textual analysis of critics such as Martelli and Storey, and the attention that they pay to the cultural context in which the *Stanze* and the *Comento* were written, is a helpful model for studying them. Bryce's insistence on the importance of politics, propaganda and diplomacy to Simonetta's posthumous appearances in poetry is equally perceptive, whilst Greene's comments on the connections between her and Poliziano's use of imitation are invaluable. On the other hand, there is a great deal of disagreement between Martelli, Ventrone, Storey and Orvieto as to the role that Neoplatonism does or does not play in the *Stanze*, a debate that has dominated recent scholarly debate on Simonetta. Moreover, whilst Poliziano and Lorenzo's depictions of her have often been discussed, the 'minor' poets who wrote about her have been almost entirely neglected. This means that the *Stanze* and the *Comento* have not been examined in the light of the other poems written on Simonetta, and what they can tell us about the literary context in which the more famous works were written. Furthermore, with the exception of Bryce, studies of Simonetta have tended to focus on the philosophical and literary traditions that influenced her presentation in verse, rather than the political considerations that may have been equally important. There is a

¹⁹ Daughter of Simonetta's half-sister, Battistina.

need, therefore, to broaden the scope of Bryce's study, taking into account the other poetic representations of Simonetta, and internal as well as external affairs. Moreover, it is necessary to bring together the philosophical and literary approaches of Martelli *et al*, with Bryce's interest in political history.

In this thesis, therefore, I study both the cultural and political motivations that determined the manner in which Simonetta is represented in Florentine vernacular poetry of the 1470s and 1480s²⁰. I examine her in the context of the changing cultural and literary preoccupations of late-fifteenth century Florence, and of the city's interest in both its vernacular and classical roots. This vision of Florence, taking pride in its perceived ancient heritage and its great *Trecento* poets, was promoted by Lorenzo de' Medici as a means of securing his own position in Florentine society and of raising the city's profile 'abroad'. A fresh style of verse in the *volgare* was therefore necessary to convey this dual inheritance, combining classical and vernacular influences. In this thesis I examine the ways in which Simonetta's poets create, and respond to, this new ideal, both cultural and political, of Florentine poetry. More specifically, I assess whether they use her to construct a new literary paradigm of womanhood in line with these developments, and to what extent Simonetta becomes symbolic of this envisioning of Tuscan culture. This will include considering the role that Ficino's doctrines on beauty and love play in her portrayals, since the revival of Platonic philosophy was one of the most important proofs of Florentine and Medicean connections to the classical past. I do not attempt here to come to any conclusions as to the importance of Neoplatonism to Tuscan society as a whole, and do not enter into the debate as to

²⁰ Representations of Simonetta in Latin, in 'art' and in vernacular texts that fall outside of these criteria will be considered in my PhD thesis.

whether a ‘Platonic Academy’ existed²¹. However, by examining the importance of Ficinian thought in representations of Simonetta I hope to shed light on these issues. In addition, I analyse the impact of Medici patron-client relationships on the manner in which she is portrayed, and her role in creating a ‘courtly’ image for the family, in both fantasy and reality. I assess the differences between the way in which Simonetta is portrayed in *Stanze* and in the *Comento* in the light of the changing political circumstances of the 1470s and 1480s, and extend Bryce’s ‘foreign affairs’- based examination of her to Luigi Pulci, who was also linked to Naples. This also leads me to consider Simonetta’s role in the early stages of the *questione della lingua* debate, in which poets and other cultural figures argued as to which form of the Italian vernacular was the greatest.

In Chapter One I discuss Poliziano’s representation of Simonetta in the *Stanze*. I begin by analysing Poliziano’s creation of a new, composite ideal of femininity through Simonetta, via his interweaving of echoes of classical philosophy, mythology and literature with references to the women of earlier Tuscan vernacular poetry. I examine how Simonetta becomes at once a goddess-like nymph and a Laura-like figure, embodying this new, dual sense of *fiorentinità*. I then consider how Poliziano’s portrayal of Simonetta was affected by his relationship to the Medici family. I argue that she is illustrative of the poet’s need to maintain his privileged position in competitive Laurentian circles by ingratiating himself with his patrons. By portraying the Medici, and Simonetta, who was so associated with them, in an extremely positive light, he flatters them both directly and indirectly. I also point out that, given the complexity of relations between Naples and Florence in the 1470s, and Simonetta’s links to the former city, Poliziano’s portrayal of Simonetta as a near-divine figure may have been of some political utility to Lorenzo.

²¹ See, for example, Kristeller 1943 and Hankins 1991. I shall deal with this in my PhD thesis.

Furthermore, I assess Poliziano's connection to Giuliano, analysing how the poet's portrayal of the younger Medici brother may have been designed to please him as much as Lorenzo. I also note how the poem's creation of an image of courtly love and life that was specifically Florentine and Medicean helped to legitimise the Medici's unstable and unofficial role in the city, and how, by being one of the many poets who wrote about Simonetta, Poliziano contributes to the construction of the courtly society that he depicts. Finally, I examine the effect that the poem may have had on Simonetta herself, demonstrating how it portrays her as virtuous and unattainable, working her 'relationship' with Giuliano into the poetic tradition of noble love, thus quashing any scandal that may have arisen from her association with him. The third section of the chapter is dedicated to analysing how Poliziano's portrayal of Simonetta celebrates the so-called renewal of Florentine culture and politics under Lorenzo. I argue that Poliziano depicts Simonetta as the triumphal embodiment of the flourishing Tuscan landscape of the *Stanze*, symbolic of the 'revival' in the region's poetry, art and society as a whole.

In Chapter Two I turn my attention to Lorenzo's presentation of Simonetta in his *Comento de' miei sonetti*. Comparing Lorenzo's use of imitation to that of Poliziano, I argue that whilst Poliziano subtly interweaves his subtexts, Lorenzo uses Simonetta as a means to display ostentatiously his debt to earlier Florentine vernacular poetry, classical mythology, and Platonic philosophy. I demonstrate how his Simonetta is an openly patriotic figure and civic symbol, displaying both the superiority of Florentine culture and the importance of Lorenzo's contribution to it. In the chapter's second section I examine the political aspects of Simonetta's portrayal in the *Comento*. Examining Lorenzo's presentation of himself as enriching the Tuscan vernacular in his 'Proemio', and his assertion that literary and political success are connected, I argue that he

uses the *Comento* to portray himself as the defender of Florence's cultural and territorial interests. I argue, moreover, that Lorenzo, in his depiction of the grief caused by Simonetta's death, presents himself not as the city's ruler or chief patron, but merely as one of the many citizens and poets who were affected by this tragedy. By depicting himself as experiencing the same emotions as his Florentine subjects, he becomes the spokesperson for the city's grief. In addition, I examine how Lorenzo uses Simonetta to portray himself as a Platonic-style philosopher-king, led along the road to wisdom by her star. I also consider the importance of the relationship between Florence and Naples to Lorenzo's description of Simonetta. In the final section of the chapter I bring these literary and political strands together, analysing Lorenzo's presentation of Simonetta as an iconic beacon of hope and identity for 1480s Florence, a figure who embodies the city's cultural and political life in the 1470s, its crisis of 1478- 1479, and its increasing stability in the 1480s.

In the final chapter of this thesis I compare 'minor' representations of Simonetta by Bernardo Pulci, Luigi Pulci, Girolamo Benivieni and an anonymous poet to those of the *Stanze* and the *Comento*. I argue that only two of the poems respond positively to the new ideal of femininity created by Poliziano and Lorenzo, adopting some of its features, whilst the others underline their poets' disinterest in, and even rejection, of it by working exclusively with Petrarchan and stilnovistic concepts of womanhood. This hints at conflicts between the poets in terms of differences of allegiance, disagreements over how the *volgare* should be used, and competition over access to patronage. Simonetta may therefore have occasioned an unofficial

tenson²², providing the seemingly innocuous common ground by means of which not-so-innocuous tensions are expressed. On the other hand, many of the poems are addressed to Giuliano, mirroring Poliziano's complimentary depiction of Simonetta and, in the case of Bernardo Pulci's 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive', of the family itself. The fact that Luigi Pulci directs his poem not to Giuliano but to Alfonso d'Aragona²³ stands out, therefore, as a provocative gesture of dissent from a poet who had fallen out of favour with his some-time patrons and friends. In taking on the role of 'court' poets, I argue that, much like Poliziano, the other 'minor' poets lend an air of legitimacy to the Medici's control of Florence. At the same time, as I point out, the poems do not have the same flourishing atmosphere of the *Stanze*, perhaps because the poets themselves were flourishing less well in Laurentian Florence in both literary and material terms. Bernardo's elegy, which manages to adapt Poliziano's floral Simonetta, implicitly suggesting that some consolation can be found in the fact that in death she is flourishing in verse, is the exception. It is 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive', too, I discover, that most resembles Lorenzo's patriotic depiction of Simonetta, since both works portray her as a symbol of Florence. Moreover, the fact that all of these poems are written in the vernacular suggests a new faith in the language's suitability for commemorative poetry. I go on to argue that, although the poems cannot have the same political intentions as the *Comento*, composed as they were by subjects rather than rulers, they are political in the sense that they increase the connection between Lorenzo and the vernacular, important to Lorenzo's depiction of himself as the champion of Florentine culture. It is also possible to read Luigi Pulci's sonnet on Simonetta, however controversial, as a useful addition to Lorenzo's policy of cultural diplomacy towards

²² A literary term for the competitive exchange of poems, common in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, on the same theme between two or more poets, which can refer collectively to the poems themselves.

²³ Duke of Calabria and elder son of King Ferrante of Naples.

Naples. None of the poems can render Simonetta iconic in the same way as the *Comento*, due to the fact that they were written in a different political context. Nevertheless, Bernardo's Simonetta is a similarly star-like figure, celebrating Florence's cultural achievements under the Medici, and many of the other poets associate her with light. I conclude, therefore, that whilst the 'minor' poems written for her do mirror certain aspects of her portrayal in the *Stanze* and the *Comento*, they are as expressive of the tensions inherent in Laurentian poetic circles as of any consensus as to how she should be portrayed.

CHAPTER ONE

‘UN NON SO CHE DIVINO’:

SIMONETTA IN POLIZIANO’S STANZE

Introduction

In this chapter I shall discuss Poliziano’s presentation of Simonetta in *Le Stanze Cominciate per la Giostra del Magnifico Giuliano di Piero de’ Medici*. This unfinished mini-epic of approximately 1475-1478 celebrates the victory of Giuliano de’ Medici, younger brother of Lorenzo, the *de facto* ruler of Florence, in the city’s joust of 29 January 1475, and his love for Simonetta. Unique in the sense that it is the only poem on Simonetta to have been begun whilst she was still alive, it was composed in the successful early years of Poliziano’s association with the Medici family. The gifted poet, born in 1454, had only arrived from his native Montepulciano in 1469, but by 1473 had gone to live in Palazzo Medici, Lorenzo’s personal residence in Florence, as a scholar and poet. He became Lorenzo’s personal secretary in 1474, and was tutor to his son, Piero, by the end of 1475.

Simonetta’s appearance in the *Stanze* takes place approximately a third of the way through the first of the work’s two books. Iulio (the classicising version of Giuliano’s name employed throughout by Poliziano) has scorned love and dedicated himself, Hippolytus-like, to hunting. Cupid decides to take his revenge by conjuring the image of a deer (I. 34), which Iulio pursues fruitlessly until he reaches a meadow (I. 37. 6), whereupon the deer vanishes and is

replaced by a nymph (I. 37. 8) dressed in white: Simonetta. The turbulence of the hunt gives way to an atmosphere of ecstatic contemplation as Iulio, ‘tutto ripien di meraviglia’ (I. 38. 5), feels ‘una nuova dolcezza’ inspired in him by Simonetta’s beauty (I. 38. 7-8). Cupid shoots an arrow of love through her eyes into Iulio’s heart. The young man immediately feels the powerful effects of love, and the once proud and dynamic hunter gazes at her in admiration (I. 42. 7-8).

Simonetta’s beauty and virtuous nature are then described in detail (I. 43- 47), until she becomes aware of Iulio’s presence and makes to go (I. 47- 48). In order to prevent her departure, Iulio begs to know who she is (I. 48-49). She replies by telling him her name, her origins, her pastimes and her marital status, then orders him to return to his party as she herself leaves (I. 51-56). Iulio is left gazing after her in wonder and despair (I. 56). Simonetta then disappears for the rest of Book I and, beyond a passing reference made to her by Cupid during his visit to the realm of Venus (II. 10), does not return until II. 28. Here she appears in a dream sent to Iulio by Venus in order to spur him to fight in her honour at a joust. In this vision Simonetta, dressed as Minerva, in a reworking of Petrarch’s ‘Triumphus Pudicitie’²⁴, attacks Cupid, who begs Iulio to help him defeat her, that is, to conquer Simonetta’s disinterest towards him, and towards Love in general, by proving his worth at a tournament and offering his victory to her. Poliziano was forced to adapt his tale of triumphal love in order to take account of Simonetta’s death in April 1476 from consumption. In Iulio’s dream, therefore, she is taken away from him, as the air turns brown, the earth trembles, and the sky and moon turn the colour of blood (II. 33-34). However, she immediately returns in the form of *Fortuna*, remaining in control of Iulio’s life, as the world becomes beautiful once more (II. 34). Iulio awakes, inspired to win glory in the joust (II. 39). Poliziano’s composition of the poem was then definitively interrupted by the assassination of

²⁴ ‘Triumph of Chastity’

Giuliano at the hands of the Pazzi conspirators in 1478, meaning that the work comes to an abrupt halt following Iulio's vow to claim both victory and Simonetta (II. 46).

In this chapter I shall argue that Poliziano's representation of Simonetta is bound up with the promotion of Florence as the daughter of ancient Rome by prominent thinkers such as Cristoforo Landino, Filippo Villani and Loschi di Cino Rinuccini²⁵. I shall demonstrate that Poliziano uses Simonetta to create an ideal of womanhood built upon both classical and vernacular literary models, and that he then uses this paradigm as a symbol and celebration of the newly energised Tuscan *volgare*. My second line of argument will discuss the more utilitarian factors that may have inspired Poliziano's portrayal of Simonetta, examining how the poem is designed to flatter the noblewoman and her Medici benefactors. In doing so, I shall consider Poliziano's relationship with Lorenzo, with Giuliano and with Simonetta, and the Medici's need to fashion a courtly environment for themselves in fact and in fiction. Finally, I shall bring together the poetic and political interpretations of the first two sections of the chapter, suggesting that Poliziano's portrayal of Simonetta as the floral heart of the flourishing natural world depicted in the *Stanze* celebrates the so-called renewal of Florentine culture and society that took place under Lorenzo²⁶.

²⁵ See Tanturli 1992: 9-11 for an explanation of these theories.

²⁶ Whether this renewal actually took place has been a subject of intense scholarly debate, with critics such as Kristeller (1943) convinced of the existence of a 'Platonic Academy', and others, for example Hankins (1991), vehemently against the idea. This dispute will be dealt with in my PhD thesis, however, rather than in the present work.

The creation of a new ideal of femininity

In this section I shall demonstrate how Poliziano's portrayal of Simonetta embodies the changes that were taking place in Florentine literature during the years of her rise to prominence and of her untimely demise. The 1460s and 1470s were a time of experimentation in Tuscan vernacular poetry, during which poets imitated classical texts, experimented with existing forms of Tuscan verse, and began to create others, such as the mini-epic²⁷. Running parallel to this was Marsilio Ficino's ground-breaking translation of the works of Plato, sponsored by the Medici. His attempts to syncretise Platonic and Christian beliefs were equally influential, with works such as *El Libro Dell'Amore*, a commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, highlighting the compatibility of their respective accounts of the divine nature of love and beauty. The study of the ancient world was therefore fast becoming one of Florence's major cultural concerns. At the same time, thinkers such as Landino, Villani and Loschi di Cino Rinuccini were keen to assert the supremacy of Florentine poetry, insisting that since the last great poet of antiquity, Claudian, and the first of the modern age, Dante, were native to the city it had the right to consider itself the heir to ancient Rome (Tanturli 1992: 9-11).

Lorenzo de' Medici's rise to power in 1469 saw these cultural developments given a political spin. His patronage of Florence's vernacular, and his promotion of it as the language of literature and culture, meant that he could present himself as its champion in an era when the *questione della lingua* debate²⁸ was becoming increasingly important. The fact that he oversaw

²⁷ For a recent account of these developments see Gilson 2009: 146-147.

²⁸ Migliorini (2004: 310) provides a useful definition of the debate: 'Essa è il prodotto delle riflessioni nate dall'incertezza della norma linguistica [...] e dal desiderio di porvi rimedio. Intervengono nella discussione alcuni fra i più autorevoli rappresentanti del gusto letterario e linguistico, a difendere quel tipo di lingua verso cui si erano orientate come scrittori'.

Simonetta's posthumous transfiguration into a vernacular icon, when only three years previously Albiera degli Albizzi²⁹ had been mourned almost exclusively in Latin and Greek, suggests the significance that he attributed to asserting the superiority of Florence's *volgare* through practical demonstrations of its power. Furthermore, the new ruler was keen to end the division between 'Medicean culture', focussed on Latin literature and thought, and that of Florence's traditional oligarchy, concerned with preserving the city's great *Trecento* poetic and republican heritage (Martelli 1992: 40). A rethinking of Florentine poetry, which combined the legacy of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio with more recent achievements in classical scholarship, would solve this dilemma, allowing Lorenzo to associate himself with both traditions, and to present himself as being at the head of a revival in the city's culture. Poliziano's *Stanze* provided exactly this fusion of ancient and vernacular influences by weaving together echoes of classical poetry and mythology with references to works in the *volgare*. Indeed, eighteenth-century critics such as Crescimbeni and Tiraboschi are particularly convinced of Poliziano's role as one of the most significant of Lorenzo's supporters in reviving the *volgare* from a century of decline (Maier 1954: 234). Moreover, his portrayal of Simonetta presented a new ideal of poetic femininity that corresponded with these cultural changes, being at once both intrinsically 'Tuscan' in its reworking of the famous models provided by Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura, and 'classical' in its imitation of Greek and Roman texts.

In the *Stanze* Simonetta is deliberately integrated into the Tuscan literary tradition of beautiful, idealised and unattainable young women. References to Dante and, in particular,

²⁹ Another young woman of the Florentine elite who died at the age of 15 in 1473, a few days before she was due to marry Sigismondo della Stufa, Lorenzo's childhood friend. For an overview of her life and of the poetry dedicated to her see Patetta 1917-1918 and Zannoni 1893.

Petrarch can be found throughout the poem's depiction of Simonetta, in which there are frequent but subtle echoes of *Trecento* verse in the language and imagery employed by Poliziano. For example, I. 43, in which Poliziano begins an extended description of the nymph, clearly draws upon Petrarchan norms of beauty. These norms, or the 'canone breve' of poetic femininity, as Pozzi (1979: 7) collectively defines them³⁰, follow a fairly precise pattern. The focus of the description tends to be the head and facial features, particularly the hair, eyes, cheeks and mouth, with occasional references to the neck, breast and hands. At the same time, these features are conveyed in metaphorical terms, as the names of the body parts are frequently avoided. The skin, lips and hair tend to be depicted as white, red or yellow respectively, with the latter colours compared most often to roses, and gold or amber (Pozzi 1979: 7). In correspondence with these norms, Simonetta is described as 'candida' (I. 43. 1), as wearing a dress decorated with roses (I. 43. 2), and as having a beautiful head of golden ringlets (I. 43. 3), much as Petrarch underlines Laura's bloneness. Poliziano's depiction of her 'fronte umilmente superba' (I. 43. 4) is a particularly Petrarchan oxymoron, chiming with similar descriptions of Laura's 'atti [...] soavemente alteri' and 'dolci sdegni alteramente humili' in *RVF*. XXXVII. 100-1, and her 'vista sì dolce superba' in *CXC*. 5³¹. Stanza I. 50, where Simonetta reacts to Iulio's plea that she tell him who she is, is also exquisitely Petrarchan, drawing upon a series of the poet's sonnets. Poliziano's description of Simonetta's face, which 'lampeggiò d'un sì dolce e vago riso,/ che i monti avre' fatto ir, restare il sole,/ che ben parve s'aprisi un paradiso' (I. 50. 2) echoes Petrarch's account of 'l lampeggiar' of Laura's 'angelico riso/ che solean fare in terra un paradiso' in *RVF*. CCXCII. 6-7, and his assertion that Laura's words could move mountains or halt rivers in their tracks in

³⁰ Due to the *Trecento* poet's contraction of the medieval *topoi* that governed literary depictions of women.

³¹ For a detailed account of these intertextual references see Puccini 2004: 39-49.

CLVI. 7-8. Furthermore, Poliziano's metaphorical depiction of Simonetta's teeth and lips as 'perle e viole' (I. 50. 5) fits with the white and red colouring of a traditional Petrarchan lady, and most particularly with the pearls and roses that characterise Laura's mouth in *RVF*. CLVII.12-13, CC. 10-1 and CCXX. 5-6³².

In II. 28's dream sequence Simonetta appears more explicitly in the guise of Laura and of the other virtuous women in Petrarch's 'Triumphus Pudicitie'. For example, in the 'Triumph' Laura is described as wearing a white dress, as carrying Minerva's shield and as tying Cupid to a column so that he can be punished, whilst Lucretia and Penelope break his arrows and quiver, and pull out his feathers (*Tr. Pud.* 118-135). Simonetta is an equally imposing figure, having tied Cupid to the trunk of an olive tree (II. 28. 2-4) so that she can pluck out his feathers and destroy his bow and arrows (II. 28. 7-8). Moreover, she too is dressed in a 'candida gonna' (II. 28. 5) and bears Minerva's armour (II. 28. 5-6), with both poets referring to Medusa in their depictions of these weapons (*Tr. Pud.* 119; *Stanze*. II. 28. 6)³³.

Octave 34 of Book II, in which Poliziano alludes to Simonetta's death, is replete with references to earlier works in the Tuscan vernacular, as Puccini (2004: 132) points out. Most notable is Poliziano's evocation of Dante's prediction of Beatrice's demise in the *Vita Nuova*, in which the sun darkens and the Earth is shaken by terrible tremors (*Vita Nuova*. XXIII. 5). In Poliziano's version of events, the air becomes brown, there is an earthquake, the sky and moon turn the colour of blood, and the stars fall from the heavens (II. 34. 1-4).

³² See Puccini's notes on the stanza (2004: 45-46).

³³ Puccini gives further details of these similarities (2004: 128-129).

There is also something of the dynamic of love presented by Dante, the *stilnovisti* and Petrarch in the way in which Simonetta is put on a pedestal throughout the poem, and shown to hold tremendous power over the once dynamic Iulio. This is in line with the conventions of these forms of love poetry, in which the patriarchal beliefs of the society of the era were to some extent overturned, allowing men to present themselves as the helpless victims of angelic ladies who ruled over them via the power of love³⁴. For example, in I. 59 Iulio's reversal of fortune, and his submission to love and to Simonetta's beauty, are figured in metaphorical terms, with the youth depicted as the hunter hunted, and as a once free man now bound in chains:

Dianzi eri d'una fera cacciatore,

più bella fera or t'hai ne' lacci involto;

dianzi eri tuo, or se' fatto d'Amore;

sei or legato, e dianzi eri disciolto.

(I. 59. 1-6)

Alongside the echoes of Dante, Petrarch and the Florentine poetic tradition, there are numerous references to the classical world in Poliziano's depiction of Simonetta. There is her quasi-mythological appearance in I. 37, in which the white deer created by Cupid to ensnare the rebellious Iulio metamorphoses into a beautiful woman. This immediately places her on a level beyond that of ordinary mortals. She is described as a nymph (I. 37. 8), recalling nature spirits connected with beauty and love in both Greek and Roman mythology. The impression that

³⁴ See Martines 2001: 17-18 for a more detailed explanation of this phenomenon.

Simonetta is being presented as a kind of nature goddess is reinforced by her appearance in the timeless landscape of the forest, a context that, presumably due to the poem's interruption in the opening phases of Book II, she never leaves, except as a vision in Iulio's dream. There is even something in her devastating impact upon Iulio, of the classical myths of young men punished for trespassing upon the privacy of goddesses bathing in the woods recounted by Ovid, for example, in the third book of his *Metamorphoses*. There are, indeed, a number of parallels between Iulio's fate and that of Actaeon. Both are young hunters who become separated from their friends in the forest, and meet with unexpected suffering. At the promptings of destiny, Actaeon strays into a valley sacred to Diana, chances upon her naked, and for his misfortune is transformed into a stag, and is subject to torments of fear and pain as his hounds tear him apart and his companions call upon him to share the sport. Iulio, similarly, is led away from his companions by the machinations of Cupid, and is transformed by his meeting with Simonetta from the pursuer to the pursued. He does not physically die, but loses his heart (I. 57. 1-2), his happiness (I. 57-59) and his former sense of self, feeling himself to be one of the lovers (I. 57. 5) whom he once despised (I. 12-21). Moreover, his friends' panicked cries of 'Iulio Iulio' (I. 62-63) when they find him missing echo those of Actaeon's fellow hunters. Iulio is as lost to them, Poliziano implies, as Actaeon was to his companions.

Octave 45 adds another, more explicitly mythological layer to Poliziano's portrayal of Simonetta. Here Simonetta is compared to a number of classical goddesses: to Thalia, a name attributed to one of the Muses, a Grace, a nymph and a Nereid; to Minerva, the Greek and Roman goddess of warfare and wisdom, associated with chastity, beauty and intelligence; and to virginal Diana, the old Italian goddess of nature, wild animals, hunting, women and the moon, identified

with the Greek deity Artemis. Although, as Puccini notes (2004: 41), it was fairly standard for *Quattrocento* poetry to praise female beauty in this manner, Poliziano's choice of goddesses serves to heighten the sense of elemental and powerful, but also wise and joyful, femininity that pervades his portrayal of Simonetta. This impression is aided by his depiction of 'Ira', 'Superbia', 'Biltà' and 'Leggiadria' in the second half of the octave (I. 45. 4-8). These virtues and vices are personified, and so presented almost as deities in their own right. The fact that 'Anger' retreats before her, that 'Pride' has no power in her presence, and that 'Beauty' and 'Loveliness' point her out in amazement, implies that her beauty and grace are so exceptional that she is goddess-like. She is not merely beautiful or graceful, but embodies the concepts themselves. In much the same way, Poliziano does not state that she is virtuous, but comments that 'ogni dolce virtù' is in her company (I. 45. 7), implying that Simonetta is on a higher level than the virtues themselves. The exact nature of these merits is made clearer in the following verse, in which personifications of 'Onestate' (I. 46. 1) and 'Gentilezza' (I. 46. 3) are similarly obedient to her, the former humbly walking beside her, and the latter even imitating her movements.

Poliziano imbues Iulio's first exchange with Simonetta, in I. 49, with a similar air of classically-inspired divinity. The young man's words, in which he begs to know who she is, and addresses her as a virgin goddess or nymph, are directly based on the classical examples of Homer and Virgil. For example, in Book VI of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus wins the assistance of the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa by questioning whether she is a goddess or a mortal, and comparing her to Artemis (149-152). In the 'Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite', once attributed to Homer, Anchises talks to Aphrodite in much the same manner, wondering whether she is Artemis, Leto, Aphrodite, Themis, Athena, or perhaps a nymph (92-100). The most important model for

Poliziano's I. 49 is Aeneas' meeting with the disguised Venus in Book I of the *Aeneid*, which takes the Homeric examples as inspiration. Here, Aeneas, much like Iulio in the *Stanze*, greets Venus as a virgin, declares that her appearance is beyond mortal and that she must certainly be a goddess, maybe Diana or a nymph (326-329). Simonetta is therefore subtly connected with both the Greek and Roman goddesses of love, and with the works of the greatest poets of antiquity.

Simonetta's insistence that she is not a goddess, but a normal married woman (I. 51. 4) who was born in Liguria (I. 51. 3) would, at first glance, appear to negate the divine aura that Poliziano has been weaving around her. Nevertheless, her words increase the sense that she is a goddess. Her reply resembles Aphrodite's assertion that she is a mere mortal in the 'Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite' (108- 110), and Venus' refusal to be honoured as a god in the *Aeneid*. I. 334-5. There is much in octaves 51, 52 and 53 to convey the same impression, even if Simonetta is simply describing her frequent visits to the forest, the location of her house and her attendance at church. Her words are full of Latinisms, for example, 'qui lieta mi dimoro Simonetta' (I. 52. 6), which, as Ghinassi points out, is a transposition of a construction that even in Latin had a particular solemnity (1957: 52). She refers to mythological deities such as Neptune (I. 51. 8) and nymphs (I. 52. 8). Most famous is her assertion that Iulio should not be amazed by her beauty, 'ch'io nacqui in grembo a Venere' (I. 53. 8). The precise meaning of this phrase has been much disputed³⁵, but whether it is Neoplatonic in origin or simply a reference to Simonetta having been born close to the sea, it is yet another example of Simonetta being closely associated not only with mythology, but with the goddess of love herself. As Storey argues, Poliziano's abandonment

³⁵ See, for example, Martelli 1995: 105; Orvieto 2009: 252; Storey 2003: 608; Puccini 2004: 48.

of the personal viewpoint that characterised Tuscan love poetry allowed him to place Giuliano and Simonetta's stilnovistic 'love story' in this wider, mythological context (2003: 618).

Most often, the echoes of classical and vernacular works in Poliziano's depiction of Simonetta are interwoven, in, as Greene puts it, a 'subtle and haunting intercontamination of a hundred subtexts' (1982: 158). First and foremost, there is the poem's mini-epic form which, as we have seen, draws on the great epics of the classical world, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. Simultaneously, its use of *ottava rima* betrays the influence of Boccaccio, who, in works such as the *Teseida*, transformed the ancient epics into something distinctly Italian, and developed the genre of the vernacular narrative poem written in octaves. There are also numerous examples of language and imagery that recall both vernacular and classical texts. For instance, in I. 44 Poliziano's description of Simonetta's complexion as resembling 'ligustri e rose' (I. 44. 6) recalls Claudian's description of Proserpina in his *De raptu Proserpinae*³⁶, thus heightening Simonetta's divine, mythological aura. At the same time, the octave's depiction of Simonetta's sparkling eyes, and the way in which they make the air around her serene through the power of the love that they inspire (I. 44. 1-4), echoes very similar depictions of the eyes of Laura and Beatrice, in Petrarch's *RVF. CCLVIII. 1-2*, and Dante's *Vita Nuova, XXI. 2*, respectively. Even the most classicising of octaves are, on closer inspection, replete with references to vernacular poets. For example, Simonetta's defeat of the personifications of 'Anger' and 'Pride' in octave 45 mirrors Beatrice's effect on these vices in *Vita Nuova. XXI. 2*. Stanza 47's depiction of Simonetta as weaving a garland of flowers and rising to her feet with them in her lap is similarly rich in echoes of both classical and vernacular literature, recalling depictions of women and flowers in Boccaccio's

³⁶ See Puccini 2004: 41 for further details.

Teseida and *Fiammetta*, Dante's *Purgatorio*, Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*³⁷. The same blending of classical and vernacular texts can be observed in I. 55. 7-8, in which flowers are depicted as springing up from Simonetta's footsteps. The most direct reference here is to Petrarch's *RVF*. CLXV. 1-4, but, as Puccini (2004: 50) and Carrai (2007: 89) point out, it is also an image that has classical roots, common to works by Hesiod, Apollonius of Rhodes, Lucretius, Persius and Claudian.

Beyond this interweaving of ancient and vernacular literature, there is also evidence that Poliziano is following Ficino's example of syncretising Christian and pagan beliefs. For example, whilst Simonetta is depicted by Poliziano as being goddess-like, there are aspects of her portrayal that have a distinctly Christian flavour. I. 49's depiction of her as a 'vergin sovrân' (I. 49. 1) lends her a distinctly Marian air. Similarly, whilst she uses classicising terminology such as 'sacri altar' (I. 53. 3) and 'tempî' (I. 53. 3) to describe her visits to church, it is emphatically the Christian God whom she is worshipping. Moreover, she is frequently associated with Christian virtues such as purity (I. 43. 1), humility (I. 43. 4), the rejection of anger (I. 45. 5), and chastity (II. 28).

Much of the imagery associated with Simonetta might also be said to have Neoplatonic roots. This remains a point of fierce debate in scholarship on the *Stanze*. Mario Martelli (1995) argues that the poem is an illustration of Ficino's theory of the three levels of being, namely sensual, rational and contemplative. For him, the white deer conjured up by Cupid represents the vain desires of the life of senses, in which humans follow their appetites in an animalistic way (94). All of Simonetta's words and actions are proof that she represents the rational, or active,

³⁷ See Puccini 2004: 43 for further details.

life, most particularly her assertion that she was born ‘in grembo a Venere’ (I. 53. 8). According to Martelli, this makes her the allegorical daughter of Venus, the perfect image of divine beauty, symbolic of earthly (civic and political) virtue and of the love that the soul feels for divine beauty itself (105). Venus, the description of whose realm takes up much of Book I of the *Stanze* (I. 68-125), represents this divine beauty and the superior life of those who dedicate their lives to contemplating it (130-131; 136). Ventrone (2007), accepting Martelli’s arguments as to the *Stanze*’s Neoplatonic significance, suggests that it should be considered as part of a wider Platonic ‘project’ that centred on Simonetta. In Ventrone’s opinion, Poliziano’s *Stanze*, Lorenzo’s *Comento* and the banner that Botticelli painted for Giuliano for the 1475 joust, here described as the first of many idealised portraits of Simonetta by the artist³⁸, were all responsible for her transformation into a Neoplatonic icon (2007: 36-47). At the other end of the scale, Orvieto (2009) strongly rejects these theories, and denies the existence of any Neoplatonic influence in the *Stanze*. His Poliziano is a man fundamentally uninterested by notions of the hereafter (24), whose portrayal of Simonetta is without coherence, and devoid of any particular philosophical doctrine.

The reality may lie somewhere between these extremes. Whilst many of the aspects of the poem that could be termed Ficinian could as easily be derived from Petrarchan and stilnovistic poetic traditions (Storey 2003: 610), it is unlikely that Poliziano was unaware of their correspondence to Neoplatonic ideas. For example, I. 41 depicts Iulio’s experience of the physical effects of love, which include the sensation both of being on fire (I. 41. 2) and of being drenched in an icy sweat (I. 41. 4), make his heart tremble (I, 41, 3) and inflame him with the

³⁸ The debate as to whether Simonetta was represented in the visual arts is beyond the scope of this thesis, but will be dealt with in my PhD.

desire to feast his eyes upon Simonetta. He is so taken up with this bittersweet delight in her beauty that he does not realise that he is in love. On the one hand, this description finds its counterpart in Petrarch's sonnet XVII, in which the poet is similarly tormented by joy (5-8) and pain (1-4; 9-11), happy only when able to fix his eyes on his beloved (8). On the other, Ficino's analysis of how the soul becomes inflamed with love when confronted with beauty, wishes to possess it, and is thus caught between delight in loveliness and the fear of being deprived of it (1987: 113), fits equally well with Poliziano's take on the process of falling in love. Similarly, Poliziano's frequent depictions of Simonetta's eyes are at once Petrarchan and Ficinian. Her sparkling eyes (I. 44. 1-4; I. 55. 1-2), through which Cupid shoots his arrow at the unsuspecting Iulio (I. 40), mirror the many times that Petrarch praises the 'dolce lume' (LXXII. 2) of Laura's eyes, and his complaint in *RVF*. III that Cupid attacked him through them when he was unprepared. At the same time, they echo Ficino's identification of the eyes as the dwelling place of the soul, which shines out from them (1987: 190), and description of them as wounding the heart of the beholder with a 'velenosa freccia' (1987: 113).

The most convincing evidence for a Ficinian influence on the *Stanze* lies, as Storey argues (2003: 608), in the sensual language used by Poliziano. Ficino insisted that beauty has a moral value in its ability to allow the onlooker to contemplate the beauty of God, which he believed permeated the universe, and so could be glimpsed in earthly loveliness. Poliziano's Simonetta is, in correspondence with this theory, a beautiful and sensual creation. For example, by describing the 'ventilar' (I. 56. 8) of Simonetta's dress as she walks away from Iulio, Poliziano endows her with a sense of graceful movement. His use of terms such as 'lampeggiò' (I. 50. 1) and his description of the floral motif of her dress (I. 43. 2) connect her to light and colour. Moreover,

her beautiful voice (I. 50. 5-8) and the birds who sing around her (I. 44. 8) mean that she is also associated with sound. In addition, she is frequently linked with terms such as ‘dolce’³⁹, ‘soave’⁴⁰ and ‘grazia’⁴¹. Neoplatonism, therefore, may not be the guiding principle of the *Stanze*, but it certainly has Ficinian connotations.

The effect of all this ‘intricacy of allusion’, as Greene puts it (1982: 161), is the creation in Simonetta of a new, composite ideal of femininity. On the one hand, Simonetta’s stylised beauty, chastity and virtuous character are connected to Petrarch, to a range of other vernacular poets, and to Christian doctrine. On the other, Poliziano depicts her as a classical nymph, compared both implicitly and explicitly to the goddesses of Greek and Roman mythology, and associated in particular with Venus and to Platonic concepts of love and divine beauty. In doing so, he brings together Tuscan and ancient poetic traditions, and syncretises Christian and ‘pagan’ beliefs. This has earned him high praise from critics such as Lodovico Dolce, who lauds him for being the first poet to render *ottava rima* beautiful, elevating it ‘a quella perfettione, alla quale tra Latini Virgilio, e tra Greci Omero ridussero il verso hessametro’ (1601: 228). Furthermore, by transposing echoes of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* into the vernacular he proves that the Florentine *volgare* is as suited as the classical languages to the expression of high ideals and emotions.

³⁹ I. 44. 1; I. 44. 6; I. 45. 7; I. 46. 4; I. 46. 8; I. 50. 2; I. 56. 7

⁴⁰ I. 50. 7

⁴¹ I. 55. 4

Simonetta and the Medici

As well as creating a new ideal of femininity, Poliziano's Simonetta could be read within the context of *Quattrocento* Florence's culture of *clientelismo*. Simonetta, as depicted in the *Stanze*, could be said to have a utilitarian, ingratiating aspect, designed to flatter Lorenzo, Giuliano and Simonetta. It should not be forgotten that Poliziano was a client of the Medici whose star was in the ascendancy in 1475. In fact, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, he had been living in Palazzo Medici since 1473, had become Lorenzo's *cancelliere*, or personal secretary, around July 1474, and was appointed tutor to his son, Piero, in 1475. As Martines points out, *Quattrocento* Florence was an exceptionally competitive environment, a small community in which 'favour and advantage belonged to clusters of dependents and patrons' (2001: 11), in a city which was ultimately controlled by Lorenzo via a series of patronage networks (Kent 2004: 2). As will be demonstrated in Chapter Three, there were many other poets in Florence besides Poliziano who were willing to write encomiastic works for the Medici on similar topics. Poliziano therefore had their favour to gain and his position to maintain. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the *Stanze* are, from the outset, full of praise for the Medici. In the first few octaves of the poem Giuliano becomes a 'baron toscano/ più gioven figlio della etrusca Leda' (I. 3. 6-7), flattering both to him and to his mother, Lucrezia Tornabuoni, who is here portrayed as being on the level of the beautiful lover of Zeus, and as having produced offspring equal to the mythological heroes, Castor and Pollux. His elder brother, Lorenzo, is the 'ben nato Laur, sotto il cui velo/ Fiorenza lieta in pace si riposa' (I. 4. 1-2). As Poliziano puts it, Lorenzo is 'o causa, o fin di tutte le mie voglie' (I. 4. 7). It is no wonder that this explicit flattery returns in Book II. 2-11, when Venus and Cupid discuss 'l'antica gloria e l'celebrato onore/ [...] della

Medica famiglia' (II. 3. 1-2), and take a personal interest in their affairs. Poliziano thus lends a mythological and philosophical backdrop to the family's actions, legitimising their relatively new, unstable and unofficial power.

The depiction of Simonetta should be viewed as being part of this need to ingratiate. She was, after all, a favourite of the Medici, and 'platonically' or otherwise, the 'lover' of Giuliano, as much of the poetry written about her would appear to attest⁴². Her presentation as an idealised, goddess-like figure was certainly flattering to the family. It was also a step beyond Luigi Pulci's presentation of Lucrezia Donati, Lorenzo's 'beloved', in the *Giostra*, his poem on the 1469 joust won by the older of the Medici brothers. It is true that Pulci depicts Lucrezia as being inspired by Venus to weave a garland that she will grant to Lorenzo only once he has competed in a tournament (8. 1-8), thus setting the poem's narrative into action, and that he also describes her as a 'gentil ninpha' (8. 2) 'd'ogni grazia incoronata' (7. 7). However, she appears only once in the poem, is firmly rooted in the élite Florentine context of jousts and marriage festivities, lacks the supernatural subtext that makes a goddess of Poliziano's Simonetta, and is altogether a much less significant figure in a work that is far more interested in the pomp and circumstance of the joust than in the 'love story' that prompted it. Poliziano's Simonetta, on the other hand, is, as we have seen, a vision of beauty, youth and Spring. For example, in I. 44 Poliziano depicts her as a

⁴² Due to the lack of historical information available on Simonetta's life, it is impossible to be certain what form this 'relationship' took. Bryce (2002: 19) puts this well: 'The relationship may have had a basis in personal attachment, whether mutual or on the part of Giuliano alone, or it may have been more of a socio-cultural or literary fiction, reaching its apotheosis in Giuliano's joust of 29 January 1475, during which Simonetta seems to have figured as his *dama*, and the subsequent immortalizing of that event in Poliziano's unfinished *Stanze*'. Some inconclusive evidence is provided by a letter, dated 12 January 1479, from Piero Vespucci, Simonetta's father-in-law, to Lucrezia Tornabuoni, mother of Lorenzo and Giuliano, in which the former reminds the latter of how he gave Giuliano all of Simonetta's clothes and a portrait of her following her death (Farina 2001: 35). It is also interesting to note that Piero played some role in organising the joust, as is attested by a letter, dated 29 December 1474, from Piero (then *podestà* of Milan) to Giuliano, in which he states that he has been helping the Medici's agent find 'cavalli da giostra' (ASF, *filza* 5, c.839).

heavenly figure with an almost supernatural power over nature, which causes the breezes to hush and birds to sing in her presence. Since, as Martines points out, flattering a ruler's beloved was one manner in which clients 'wooed' their patrons (2001: 103), describing her as a lovely, goddess-like figure was unlikely to have been a disinterested choice on Poliziano's part. It certainly would not have hurt his prospects with Lorenzo, who, as mentioned above, is invoked as the poet's patron at the beginning of the poem, and whose presence continues to be felt throughout as the elder, senior brother who has already won the favour of Cupid and Venus through his valorous efforts (II. 4-9). Moreover, Poliziano's portrayal of Simonetta as part-goddess, part-Laura may have been of some political utility to Lorenzo. As Bryce points out, Lorenzo's interest in Simonetta, attested by his provision of a doctor during her last illness (2002: 19), may have had much to do with her connections to Naples, via her brother-in-law, Jacopo III Appiani d' Aragona, ruler of Piombino, whose mother was an illegitimate daughter of the Neapolitan king (2002: 16). In addition, the Vespucci were linked to the southern city through a history of diplomacy and trade. Piero, her father-in-law, had even received a knighthood from King Ferrante (2002: 17- 18). Simonetta, therefore, appears to have been important to Lorenzo not for mere sentimental reasons but as a valuable tool in Florence's complex diplomatic relations with her Neapolitan allies.

The poem is, of course, explicitly about Giuliano, the younger and less powerful brother. By portraying Simonetta and Giuliano as the idealised lovers of this new poetic world, Poliziano stood to gain his approval by giving him a role of his own, at least in the realm of verse. As Fubini points out, Giuliano was frustrated with what he felt were the limits imposed on his ambitions, in one letter complaining that Lorenzo was purposely foiling his attempts to make a

name for himself (1977: 319). Piero Vespucci, too, in his 1479 letter to Lucrezia Tornabuoni, mentions that Giuliano talked of himself as ‘el peggio chontento giovane non che di Firenze ma d’Italia’ (Farina 2001: 35). Further proof of Lorenzo’s subjugation of his brother is provided by Connell, who observes that Giuliano played only a minor role as a patron in Laurentian Florence and its dominions (1994: 104-105). There is, moreover, some evidence for a close relationship between Poliziano and Giuliano, as claimed by Carducci (1863: 356). Poliziano had been living in Palazzo Medici since 1473 and was practically the same age as Giuliano, who was born in 1453 to the poet’s 1454. In his *Della congiura de’ Pazzi dell’anno 1478*, moreover, Poliziano paints an affectionate picture of Giuliano, ‘al popolo ed a’ suoi carissimo (1849: 13), and describes his own ‘dolore grandissimo’ (9) at his death. It also appears that Poliziano sometimes wrote poetry based on Giuliano’s ideas. Carducci (1863: 356), for example, raises the possibility that one of Poliziano’s *Rime*, ‘I son costretto, po’ che vuol Amore’, was written in the persona of Giuliano, due to its first-person praise of the Medici by a young man who is both a member of the family and in love with a woman who is described in strikingly similar terms to Simonetta. Certainly, one of Poliziano’s epigrams on the death of Simonetta, ‘Aspice ut esiguo capiatur marmore quicquid’, is accompanied by the affirmation ‘Julii est sententia a me versibus inclusa’⁴³ (Farina 2001: 92-93).

What is certain is that the presentation of Simonetta in the poem lends an air of respectability to the ‘relationship’ between her and Giuliano, whatever form it took in reality. She is clearly depicted as being married and unattainable (I. 51. 4), as innocently revelling in nature in the forest, thus excusing her presence there alone (I. 51. 1-2), and as being near home, and so

⁴³ ‘I have put Giuliano’s concept into verse’.

within the bounds of social control (I. 52. 5). It is clear that the relationship can never be consummated. As with Pulci's interpretation of the 'love affair' between Lorenzo and Lucrezia in the *Giostra*, Poliziano is working the relationship between Giuliano and Simonetta into the stilnovistic and Platonic concept of noble love, which insisted on the subjugation of sensual appetites⁴⁴. Given that this was the only socially acceptable form of extramarital desire at the time (Martelli 1996: 192), and that even Lorenzo concealed his affairs (Martines 2001: 103), it is not surprising that Poliziano insists upon the innocent nature of Giuliano's admiration for Simonetta.

In addition, the *Stanze* aided in creating an image of courtly love and life that was specifically Florentine and Medicean, based on the one-on-one dynamic of the poetic relationships between Petrarch and Laura, and Dante and Beatrice, on vernacular epic, and on classical texts, genres associated with the city and with the revival of interest in the ancient world that was taking place under Lorenzo's patronage. Giuliano is presented as a knight ready to fight for his lady, but one who is inspired by the chaste passions of Dante and Petrarch, by Neoplatonic theories of love, and by the high ideals of ancient epic. Given that the nature of the Medici's power was, as Bryce points out (2007: 347-348), difficult to define even at the time, this fashioning of a courtly and virtuous image for a merchant family who held no official title helped to legitimise their role within Florence and 'abroad'. Furthermore, the fact that Poliziano works the language of traditional Tuscan love poetry, whose conventions stipulated a personal viewpoint, into a third-person narrative following the fate of the city's *de facto* rulers suggests a fundamental shift in the balance of power in Florentine society, from a republic to a 'kingdom'

⁴⁴ See Robb 1935: 74-82 for an in-depth analysis of Neoplatonic theories of love.

dominated by its rulers and their ‘court’. Indeed, the fact that Simonetta was written about by so many poets associated with the Medici after her death, in the courtly genre of the ‘*lirica in mortem*’ (Carrai 1985: 88), suggests that she helped to create in actuality the courtly environment depicted in the *Stanze*, in the sense that this coming together of authors around the city’s rulers was one of the prerequisites for this transformation.

It is harder to judge the effect that the poem might have had upon Simonetta herself had she lived. It may have helped to legitimise her position in Florentine society and her association with the Medici, given that she was both ‘foreign’ and married. As Bryce comments, it was dangerous for a woman to be overly visible in fifteenth-century Florence, as she ran the risk of being considered a ‘public woman’ rather than simply a ‘woman in public’ (2001: 1087). The fact that Simonetta’s behaviour in the *Stanze* is impeccable suggests that Poliziano may have been aware of the importance of protecting her reputation, particularly following her presumably public role in the 1475 joust. She is, indeed, a thoroughly respectable figure by the moral standards of the day, being associated with chastity throughout the poem. For example, when she becomes aware of Iulio’s presence in I. 47 she is ‘alquanto paurosa’ (6), rises to her feet, and makes to leave (I. 48. 1-2) in order to protect her honour. When she addresses Iulio it is only to make clear that she is not a goddess but a mortal, married woman who is engaged in innocent pursuits in the forest (I. 51-53). When she makes her final appearance in Book II she takes on the form of Laura in Petrarch’s ‘Triumphus Pudicitie’, one of the most famous symbols of chastity in the Tuscan canon. Ventrone connects Simonetta’s modesty, and that of Albiera degli Albizzi in Poliziano’s Latin elegy ‘In Albieram Albitiam, puellam formosissimam, morientem’⁴⁵, with a

⁴⁵ ‘On the death of Albiera degli Albizzi, a beautiful girl’.

new emphasis upon the virtuous behaviour that had characterised ideal womanhood during the city's pre-Medici, republican era (2007: 32). According to Ventrone, the dealings of Lorenzo and his friends with women such as Marietta degli Strozzi and Lucrezia Donati had transgressed the traditional moral codes of Florence's élite by organising balls and parties in their honour, and granting them a greater visibility than was generally acceptable (2007: 26). In writing, they became *dame*, in a blurring of traditional vernacular chivalric ideals with reality (2007: 17). Taking this argument further, the fact that Poliziano's Simonetta is inspired not only by the vernacular epics in *ottava rima* of Boccaccio and other *Trecento* writers⁴⁶, but also by the more elevated language of classical epic, Petrarchan love poetry and Platonic philosophy⁴⁷, suggests a conscious movement away from this purely chivalric ideal. Iulio is still an epic hero capable of winning glory on the field of battle, but there is nothing scandalous about his behaviour, or that of his 'beloved', which follows the virtuous example provided by Ficinian and stilnovistic concepts of love. Poliziano's description of Lorenzo's 'love' for Lucrezia is figured in a similar manner (II. 4-9). He is therefore associating Simonetta, Lorenzo and Giuliano with virtue and moral rectitude, which all three may have needed in a Florence used to considering the Medici's relations with women as immoral⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ See Botterril 2004: 119 for details of these narrative poems, or *cantari*.

⁴⁷ See Storey's (2003: 609) insightful comments on the *Stanze*'s combination of popular and more elevated genres.

⁴⁸ See Ventrone (2007: 24, 27) for two examples of the moral judgement directed at Marietta degli Strozzi and Lucrezia Donati.

The ‘flourishing’ of Florence

If we combine the literary and political strands of the first two sections of this chapter, we can see that Poliziano not only creates a new ideal of femininity and flatters his Medici patrons through Simonetta, but also uses her to celebrate the ‘flourishing’ of Florence’s culture and society as a whole under Lorenzo. Formed from the merging of Florentine traditions old and new, she becomes a symbol of this so-called renewal, the presiding figure in an idealised depiction of the Tuscan countryside that, free from the corruption of city life, becomes the expression of the fruitfulness of Florence under Lorenzo. This association between the fertility of the natural world and the benevolent effect of the Medici’s control of Florence was not unusual, as can be seen from Poliziano’s 1477 *epistola* for the *Raccolta Aragonesa*⁴⁹, an anthology of mainly Tuscan verse sent by Lorenzo to Federico d’Aragona, in which the Florentine *volgare* is described as being ‘di fioretti e d’erba [...] rivestita’ (131). It was common practice during the late-fifteenth century to portray ‘Fiorenza’, with its connotations of the Latin term *flores*, as flourishing under its Lorenzo/*Lauro*⁵⁰. This is an idea to which Poliziano explicitly refers in I. 4, in which ‘Fiorenza’ (I. 4. 2) is described as being protected from wind and storms (I. 4. 3-4) by its ‘ben nato Laur’ (I. 4. 1). Iulio too is specifically associated with this imagery of flowers and foliage, being described as ‘Nel vago tempo di sua verde etate,/ spargendo pel volto il primo fiore’ (I. 8. 1-2). Although a commonplace for youth and beauty, the fact that Iulio is depicted in this manner assumes an added significance in Poliziano’s flourishing, Florentine world, which is as spring-like and full of promise as its young master (I. 25. 1-8). Just as Poliziano’s bee goes from flower to flower (I. 25. 7-8), echoing Lucretius’ and Seneca’s observation that a writer should imitate

⁴⁹ The *epistola* is in Lorenzo’s name, but has generally been attributed to Poliziano.

⁵⁰ See Friedman 2001: 66-67 for more information on this imagery.

and combine the work of a variety of authors when composing a piece of literature (McLaughlin 2000: 141-142)⁵¹, so, it is implied, the flourishing of this new Laurentian cultural world stems from its ability to build upon both the classical past and Florence's vernacular heritage.

Simonetta herself is the embodiment of this flourishing springtime landscape. Her beauty is inextricably associated with floral imagery from the outset. Her dress is decorated with images of flowers and grass (I. 43. 1-2; I. 47. 4), her complexion resembles 'ligustri e rose' (I. 44. 6), and her lips are like 'viole' (I. 50. 5). Immersed in the natural world, she weaves a garland of flowers (I. 47. 2-3) and rises with her lap full of them (I. 47. 1-8), a vision of the beauty and abundance of Spring. She has a special bond, moreover, with the *Stanze's* springtime landscape as a whole. For example, in I. 43. 5-8 she is depicted as delighting the forest and calming storms with the power of her glance, whilst in I. 44, breezes hush at the sound of her voice, birds sing and even the air becomes still around her, as if the natural world is worshipping her. She could, indeed, move mountains or call the Sun to a halt with the beauty of her laugh (I. 50. 2-3). When she talks of her Ligurian birthplace and adopted Florentine home, she identifies them by describing their natural features, that is to say, the sea and the Arno respectively (I. 51. 4-8). She also describes her delight in the fresh air, grass, flowers and streams of the Tuscan woodland (I. 52. 1-8), yet again associating herself with the natural world. As she leaves the glade in I. 55, nature mourns her departure, woods lament and birds cry (I. 55. 5-6) in a striking reversal of their happiness in I. 43 and I. 44. Furthermore, Poliziano compares her to Thalia (I. 45. I), whose name derives from the same stem as the Greek verb 'to bloom'⁵². She can, therefore, hardly be considered 'a talismanic

⁵¹ This became an extremely influential idea in Renaissance theories of literary imitation, cited by thinkers such as Castiglione and Bembo.

⁵² Intellectuals of the time were aware of the etymological significance of the name Thalia. For example, as Moss points out (2003: 21), in his *Cornu copiae seu Linguae latinae comentarii*, written c. 1477- 1480, Niccolò Perotti

artefact against the demon of estrangement' in a poem with 'no sense of a modern sensibility or moral style into which the past is reborn', as Greene suggests (1982: 158-169). She is, rather, a thoroughly 'modern' and celebratory figure in her combination of classical, vernacular and pastoral imagery, and is designed to reflect the cultural and political changes that were taking place in the confident world of 1470s Florence.

Simonetta is not only a celebration and example of the 'flourishing' in literary culture, but is also intended to evoke the 'revival' that was taking place in visual culture. A sizeable section of Book I of the *Stanze* (I. 97-118) is taken up with describing the relief sculpture that decorates Venus' palace. Mythological tales of love such as the birth of Venus (I. 99-103), Theseus' abandonment of Ariadne (I. 109-112), and Polyphemus' obsession with Galatea (I. 115-118) are retold in this prominent example of *ekphrasis*. In correspondence with this, Simonetta is associated three times with the term 'dipinto'⁵³. This would suggest that Poliziano is encouraging his reader to think of the paintings and sculpture that were being produced at the time, and to revel in the cultural riches of Laurentian Florence. Moreover, in the context of the Renaissance *paragone* debate, in which thinkers of the day argued as to the relative merits of poetry and painting, Poliziano appears to be stressing the superiority of the written word. His poetry, he asserts, is capable of bringing visual images to life, outsmarting the pictures themselves, which cannot hope to convey the beauty of verse. As Heffernan puts it, *ekphrasis* 'evokes the power of the silent image even as it subjects that power to the rival authority of language' (1993: 1). It should also be mentioned that several images in the poem, such as the aforementioned birth of

explains that Thalia means 'green', connecting it to the fact that a service rendered is ever-green, and thus to the Graces as presiding over 'a harmonious cycle of favours given, received, and returned'.

⁵³ Once in I. 43. 2, to describe her dress; then in I. 44. 6, to depict her delicate complexion; and finally in I. 47. 4, again in reference to her clothes.

Venus, and Simonetta rising to her feet with her lap full of flowers (I. 47. 5-8) are strikingly similar to Botticelli's *Nascita di Venere* and *Primavera*, leading many critics, most famously Aby Warburg (1966), to argue that the *Stanze* inspired the paintings⁵⁴.

This celebratory tone can also be traced in Poliziano's reworking of Petrarch's *Trionfi*, which allows him to transcend the tragic reality of Simonetta's death, and to suggest some kind of positive outcome. Book I, with Simonetta's conquest of Iulio, and Venus' submission of Mars (I. 122), is the *Stanze*'s 'Triumph of Love'. In II. 28, as we have seen, Simonetta is pictured explicitly as Laura in the 'Triumphus Pudicitie'. Triumphs of death, chastity, fortune and fame then appear in quick succession in Iulio's dream (Storey 2001: 608- 610). In I. 33 death cruelly takes Simonetta from him (II. 33. 5-8), but in II. 34. 5-8 she returns in the form of 'Fortuna' and promises eternal fame to them both, due to the great deeds that she has inspired him to carry out. Simonetta, at the centre of these triumphs, is an essential element of Poliziano's poetic world. Despite Orvieto's assertion that Simonetta's appearances in the *Stanze* lack coherence and a unifying theme (2009: 248), it is clear that she remains in triumphal mode throughout the work. Moreover, whether she is being associated with Venus, Laura or the natural world, she is designed to celebrate different aspects of the culture of 1470s Florence, and so is also consistent in this sense.

The fact that Poliziano works the 'real' Simonetta's death so cleverly into this series of triumphs, figuring it as a premonition in Iulio's dream that can be put to one side once dawn breaks, suggests that he might have been able to complete his poem without derailing its

⁵⁴ It is in part thanks to Warburg that Simonetta has come to the attention of so many scholars, particularly art historians. Many critics, Warburg included, believe that Simonetta's features can be traced in these works, and in other paintings, frescoes and sculptures of the time. I shall deal with this debate in my PhD.

narrative, themes and tones, had not his other protagonist been murdered. On the other hand, her death lends a sombre tone to his characterisation of Simonetta, rounded off by three stanzas on the implacability of fate (35- 7), and it is telling that Poliziano had only reached II. 46 before the assassination of Iulio, exactly two years after Simonetta's death, led to his definitive abandonment of the *Stanze*. In the great stilnovistic and Petrarchan tradition of beautiful and adored women dying young, it might have eventually been possible to deal with the death of the poem's heroine and continue to celebrate the optimistic world of Laurentian Florence. The loss of the *Stanze's* hero, on the other hand, and the intrusion of murder, political turmoil and war, put a stop to Poliziano's creation of the poem's happy, idealised world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Simonetta's presentation in the *Stanze* is the means through which Poliziano creates a new ideal of femininity tailored to the revival in vernacular poetry that was taking place in 1470s Florence, inspired by both the great poets of Tuscany's past and those of the ancient world. Simonetta is a composite creation of vernacular and classical sources, who has at once the beauty and virtue of Laura and Beatrice, and the goddess-like qualities of a classical nymph. This allows Poliziano to demonstrate the superiority of Florence's literature and intellectual heritage. Simonetta is also employed by Poliziano as a tool to praise and flatter his Medici patrons, and to aid them in fashioning an image of themselves as courtly princes and lovers, and, at the same time, to help turn this vision into a reality. She is, moreover, designed to be read as a triumphal figure, and as a celebration and symbol of the 'flourishing' that was taking

place in Florentine politics, philosophy, literature and art. But how does Poliziano's representation of Simonetta connect to other portrayals of her? In particular, how does she relate to the Simonetta presented in Lorenzo's *Comento de' miei sonetti*? And how is this burgeoning icon then taken up by other poets? Does she continue to be a symbol of Florentine culture? I hope to answer at least some of these questions in the following two chapters of this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO

'O CHIARA STELLA':

SIMONETTA IN LORENZO DE' MEDICI'S *COMENTO DE' MIEI SONETTI*

Introduction

The focus of this second chapter is Lorenzo de' Medici's representation of Simonetta in his *Comento de' miei sonetti*, the ruler and poet's self-commentary on his sonnets. In contrast with the *Stanze*, this work was begun following Simonetta's death, although poetry and prose were not composed simultaneously. The *Comento* is divided into three distinct sections. In the 'Proemio', Lorenzo defends his choice of genre and language, and explains the themes of the piece. The 'Argumento' contains four sonnets and their respective commentaries, commemorating an unnamed lady, who we know to be Simonetta due to Naldo Naldi's epigram 'Ad Laurentium Medicen carmen de laudibus Simonettae morientis scribentem', which refers to the first of Lorenzo's sonnets (Rochon 1963: 247; Naldi and Perosa 1943: 13). Finally, the unfinished 'Nuovo Argumento' is composed of 37 sonnets on Lorenzo's love for another anonymous woman, generally identified with Lucrezia Donati. It is certain that the four sonnets on Simonetta were written at some point after her death and no later than the second half of 1477 since they were included in the *Raccolta Aragonese*, the anthology of vernacular verse sent by Lorenzo to Federico d'Aragona at this time. According to Zanato, however, Lorenzo began to work on the prose sections of the *Comento* no earlier than March 1480 (1991: 126), meaning that

the impact that the sonnets were intended to have both in 1476/1477 and as part of the integrated work of the 1480s must be considered.

Although the 'Argumento', and by extension Simonetta's role in the *Comento* as a whole, is relatively insignificant in terms of its length, it is crucial to introducing the work's themes of ideal love and Florentine cultural supremacy. The main focus of the 'Argumento' is a retrospective consideration of the effect of Simonetta's life and premature demise upon the poet and Florence as a whole. Rather than being the almost elemental, goddess-like figure of Poliziano's *Stanze*, most at home in the solitude of the forest, she is here rooted in the context of the city, its people and its rituals from the outset. Indeed, in the introductory paragraphs of the 'Argumento' it is the collective emotions of 'il popolo fiorentino' (591) that take priority over those of the poet: all the men and women who knew her felt loved by her, loved in return, and praised her beauty and virtuous nature without jealousy (592), in a description that mirrors the qualities that were praised by Poliziano. On her death, her popularity and youth caused an outpouring of grief (592). She was admired by all even as she was carried uncovered to her final resting place, lovelier in death even than in life (592-593). Florence's 'ingegni', including the poet, rushed to celebrate and mourn her in verse (593). The focus then shifts to the fruits of Lorenzo's poetic endeavours, with his transcription of, and commentary upon, his sonnets. In Sonnet I, Simonetta is depicted as a star, which shines so brightly that the poet prays to her to dim her light so that she can be contemplated from Earth. In Sonnet II, inspired by the Ovidian myth of Clyzia- a nymph who loved the Sun, was abandoned by him, and was posthumously transformed into a heliotrope, her gaze thus fixed upon her beloved from dawn until dusk- Simonetta is the Sun to the Clyzia of those she has left behind. The focus of Sonnet III is the

poet's decision to live out the bitter years to come, since, having lost his Sun, he desires to grieve for her for as long as possible, abandoning all pleasures, including that of death, 'perché essendosi comunicata a una cosa gentilissima, di necessità partecipava di quella qualità che tanto copiosa aveva trovato in lei' (600). In contrast, he wishes to die in Sonnet IV, since death can be the only cure for the devastating memory of his loss. In the opening of the 'Nuovo Argumento', however, Lorenzo explains that his sonnets were inspired not by personal grief, but rather by the fact that Simonetta was 'laudata e deplorata nelli precedenti sonetti come publico danno e iattura comune' (606). Nevertheless, his consideration of the love and anguish that she inspired leads him to search for, and discover, a lady who is similarly deserving of his adoration (607). Simonetta is, then, the 'stella di Venere' to Lucrezia's 'novello sole', a star that announces the arrival of the Sun and then dies once this duty has been fulfilled (611-612). At this point the narrative leaves Simonetta behind in order to focus upon the 'true' object of Lorenzo's affections. Simonetta therefore plays an introductory, yet central, role in the *Comento*.

In this chapter I shall argue that a particular cultural and political agenda is at work in Lorenzo's portrayal of Simonetta, and I shall examine the connections between this depiction of her and the one developed by Poliziano. I shall begin by examining Lorenzo's fusion of vernacular and classicising influences in the figure of Simonetta, an artistic choice that links his Simonetta to that of Poliziano. In addition, I shall argue that it takes the 'patriotic' aspects of the *Stanze* further by combining a discussion of the superiority of the Tuscan language in the 'Proemio' with a more explicit use of poetic and philosophical source materials in its portrayal of Simonetta. The second section of the chapter will focus on the political facets of Lorenzo's depiction of Simonetta, considering the impression that he intended the *Comento* to make upon

both the citizens of Florence and ‘foreigners’. This will include discussions of Lorenzo’s presentation of himself as a good citizen whose emotions are representative of those of the city as a whole, of his depiction of himself as being guided to wisdom by Simonetta, his appeal to a sense of Florentine identity, and of the connections between the *Comento* and Florence’s relationship with Naples in the 1480s. The final part of the chapter will bring together the literary and political themes of sections one and two in order to analyse Lorenzo’s transformation of Simonetta into an iconic image of hope and renewal.

Simonetta as a ‘patriotic’ figure

If Simonetta in the *Comento* is, as Poliziano’s Simonetta, a hybrid creation combining both Tuscan and classical sources, this is hardly surprising. As discussed in Chapter One, Lorenzo was concerned with creating a new sense of *fiorentinità* that, building on the assertions of Cristoforo Landino, Filippo Villani and Loschi di Cino Rinuccini, linked the city’s poetic heritage with that of ancient Rome, and its contemporary successes with its Medici rulers⁵⁵. A major aspect of this Florentine self-fashioning was the promotion of its dialect. In fact, praise of the Tuscan language is one of the two major themes of the ‘Proemio’, in which Lorenzo justifies his reasons for writing ‘in lingua vulgare’ (577). According to the poet, there are four criteria for judging the ‘dignità and perfezzione’ of ‘qualunque idioma e lingua’ (577-578): it must be ‘copiosa e abundante e atta a exprimere bene il senso e concetto della mente’ (578); it must demonstrate ‘la dolcezza e armonia’ (578); it must contain ‘cose subtili e gravi e necessarie alla

⁵⁵ See Tanturli 1992: 10-12; Bausi 1997: xvi-xvii; Martelli 1995: 42; and Bullard 1994: 48-49 for further details.

vita umana' (579); and, finally, it must be 'universale e quasi comune a tutto il mondo' (580). Naturally, Lorenzo finds that Tuscan fulfils all of these conditions amply. For example, he claims 'Dante, il Petrarca e il Boccaccio, nostri poeti fiorentini, hanno, nelli gravi e dolcissimi versi e orazioni loro, mostro assai chiaramente con molta facilità potersi in questa lingua esprimere ogni senso' (581). Moreover, 'chi negherà nel Petrarca trovarsi uno stile grave, lepido e dolce, e queste cose amoroze con tanta gravità e venusta trattate, quanta senza dubbio non si truova in Ovidio, Tibullo, Catullo, Properzio o alcuno altro latino?' (582). Indeed, 'la nostra materna lingua', 'comune in tutta Italia' (577), is so great that Lorenzo does not have time to mention its 'molti altri gravi et eleganti scrittori' (583). In other words, in this 'double defence' of the Tuscan vernacular it not only reigns supreme over other forms of Italian, in an early contribution to the *questione della lingua* debate, but is also the equal of the ancient languages (Shapiro 1973: 446-450). Furthermore, Lorenzo links Florence's literary achievements to the city's political potential, stating that the *volgare* could become even greater 'aggiugnendosi qualche prospero successo e augumento al fiorentino imperio' (584). Lorenzo ends his disputation with the striking assertion that 'insino a ora si può dire essere l'adolescenza di questa lingua, perché ogni ora più si fa elegante e gentile; e potrebbe facilmente, nella iuventù e adulta età sua, venire ancora in maggiore perfezione' (584). It is this greater perfection of style that Lorenzo is openly, if humbly, attempting to fashion, claiming that he has at least attempted to write in 'quello stile che appresso e vulgari è più eccellente' (587-588).

His method is to take the greatest of the vernacular poets and fuse them with classical exemplars. However, his relation to his subtexts is very different from that of Poliziano, who in the *Stanze* draws upon Seneca's assertion that the poet must be like a bee gathering the pollen of

many different flowers to make honey. In other words, the poet must combine a series of source materials to produce a work that echoes each of them but imitates none of them exactly (*Epistuale Morales*. LXXXIV). As a result, Poliziano's Simonetta is a composite creation of interwoven ancient and vernacular texts, whose originality is based on the fact that she resembles all of them in part and yet none of them completely. Lorenzo, on the other hand, is far more explicit in his use of the material that has inspired him, giving his *Comento* a more ostentatiously Florentine flavour designed to advertise Tuscan literary achievements. For example, whilst Poliziano employed the new, unusual mini-epic form (Gilson 2009: 146-147) for his *Stanze* and rarely chose traditionally Tuscan formats for his works in the *volgare* (Ghinassi 1957: xv), Lorenzo here chooses one of the most Florentine of all genres, the self-commentary, to express his ideas⁵⁶. Moreover, the *Comento*, with its themes of death and transcendent love, is modelled on Dante's *Vita Nuova* (Roush 2002: 78), and the sonnets themselves are Petrarchan in form and language. Lorenzo's presentation of Simonetta reflects this explicit imitation of Florence's great poets. As Zanato points out, the introductory description of Simonetta in the 'Argumento' is 'palesemente ritagliata su quella di Beatrice' in the *Vita Nuova* (1991: 592). For instance, Beatrice is considered an angel by the people of Florence, who are amazed by the 'dolcezza onesta e soave' that she inspires in them through her beauty, humility and nobility (*Vita Nuova*. XXVI. 1-4). When she dies, the city is left 'quasi vedova dispogliata da ogni dignitate' (*Vita Nuova*. XXX.1). In Lorenzo's depiction of Simonetta, Florence is left equally bereft, mourning the loss of one whose beauty and grace made everyone love her without jealousy, and whose sweet manners made each person believe that she loved them above all others (591-592). Furthermore, this portrayal of Simonetta also echoes Dante's description of the 'donna giovane e

⁵⁶ See Kent 2004: 41 for further details of Lorenzo's use of traditionally Florentine genres.

di gentile aspetto molto', who dies in the early stages of the *Vita Nuova* and is wept over 'in mezzo di molte donne' (*Vita Nuova*.VIII.1). At the same time, Lorenzo quotes explicitly from Petrarch's 'Triumphus Mortis'⁵⁷ when describing Simonetta's beauty in death, asserting that 'veramente in lei si verificava quello che dice il nostro Petrarca: "Morte bella pareva nel suo bel volto"' (593).

The sonnets themselves, and the commentary appertaining to them, are full of references to earlier vernacular poetry. As mentioned above, they are Petrarchan in form, and also frequently in language. Along with the biblical-style prayer in line 11, the personification of death in line 6 of Sonnet I, the use of terms such as 'stella' (lines 1 and 9), 'belli occhi' (5), the vision of the beloved woman's posthumous ascension to heaven (9-10), and the association between her and light (1-4; 9-12) are all typically Petrarchan. Moreover, certain of Petrarch's sonnets appear to have been of particular inspiration to Lorenzo. For example, Petrarch's depiction of Laura as outshining the Sun and every other star in Sonnet XXXI is picked up in Lorenzo's Sonnet I, with its depiction of Simonetta as a star who competes in brightness with Apollo (1-8). Despite the focus on Petrarchan language in the sonnet, Lorenzo's commentary on it echoes the Dantean aspects of the introduction to the 'Argomento', not only in form but in its use of the epithet 'gentilissima', the *Vita Nuova*'s characteristic mode of address for Beatrice, to describe Simonetta.

Lorenzo's Sonnet II and its commentary display a variety of vernacular influences. The first of these is Petrarch, in terms of form, of the depiction of the lady as the poet's 'Sole' (line 10), and of Lorenzo's depiction of himself as wandering 'per certi amenissimi prati solo e

⁵⁷ 'Triumph of Death'

pensoso' (595), taken almost directly from lines 1-2 of Petrarch's XXXV. Lorenzo is also able to work with the coincidence that both Simonetta and Laura died in April, as both poets state explicitly, Lorenzo in the first line of his commentary on the poem (595), and Petrarch in lines 12-13 of Sonnet CCCXXXVI. The second poet whom Lorenzo imitates is Cino da Pistoia, the first line of whose Sonnet LI- 'Infin che gli occhi miei non chiude Morte'- is quoted fairly directly by Lorenzo in the final lines of his own poem⁵⁸. In addition, there are several allusions to Dante in the commentary, including the recurrence of the term 'gentilissima' (597) and the use of other similar superlatives such as 'excellentissima' (598). Moreover, Lorenzo draws on Dante's observation, "Di necessitate convene che la gentilissima Beatrice alcuna volta si muoia" (*Vita Nuova*. XXIII. 3), to frame his own comment upon the fragility of life, '[...] ciascuna cosa mortale, ancora che bella et excellentissima, di necessità muore' (598).

Sonnet III is even more replete with references to the Tuscan vernacular tradition, particularly to Petrarch and Dante⁵⁹. For example, Lorenzo's assertion that he would rather flee from life to 'quella vita che altri "morte" appella' (2), echoes Petrarch's rejection of the term 'death' to describe the deceased Laura's blessed state in 'Triumphus Mortis'. I. 169-171. In addition, the 'anni rei' (8) that Lorenzo foresees for himself have been lifted directly from Petrarch's CCLXVIII. 6. Moreover, Lorenzo's observation that 'morte è sì gentile oggi e sì bella' (4) echoes Dante's claim that death, having come into contact with Beatrice, must be 'gentile' (*Vita Nuova*. XXIII. 9 and 27).

⁵⁸ See Orvieto 1992: 379 for further details.

⁵⁹ See Orvieto 1992: 382 and Zanato 1979: 175-176 for a detailed explanation of how this is so.

In Sonnet IV, the vision of the distraught lover's attempts to escape his bitter memories by fleeing to lonely parts of the countryside (5-8) is, as Orvieto also points out (1992: 384), particularly Petrarchan, as is the rhetorical 'Che debb'io fare omai [...]?' (12), which recalls Petrarch's 'che debb'io far?' in line 1 of CCLXVIII. Furthermore, Orvieto links 'Se in prato lo qual germini fior' nuovi' (5) to *Par. XXXIII*, 9 ('così è germinato questo fiore').

In the 'Nuovo Argumento' there is an even more pointed reference to Dante, as the poet explains the relationship between the death of Simonetta and his own discovery of love, depicting her as the 'stella di Venere', or 'Lucifer'⁶⁰, whose light heralds the coming of the 'maggior lume' of the Sun, that is, his beloved (611). This, as Zanato points out (1992: 611), would instantly have made a late-fifteenth century reader recall the similar comparison made between Giovanna and Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*, in which the former, given the name 'Primavera'/'prima verrà', is compared to Saint John the Baptist ('lo quale precedette la verace luce'), and the latter becomes Love itself (XXIV. 3-5).

Lorenzo's use of famous vernacular texts to portray Simonetta, then, builds on Poliziano's vision of her, retaining the *Stanze's* imitation of vernacular texts, but making these references far more obvious. Moreover, he tends to adopt images and phrases wholesale, so that their origin would have been immediately recognisable to his cultured audience, stressing both his erudition and the greatness of the literary heritage to which he so often refers. She is, therefore, a thoroughly 'Tuscanised' figure, designed to leave no doubt as to the beauty and profundity of the Florentine *volgare*, nor to the poet's attitude towards it.

⁶⁰ The term 'Lucifer' is here without satanic connotations, referring to the morning star, that is, the planet Venus as viewed from Earth in the morning. It should be noted that 'Lucifer' derives from the Latin for 'bringer of light'.

Differences between the *Stanze* and the *Comento* are also visible in the classicising aspects of Lorenzo's depiction of Simonetta. On the one hand, the sonnets are full of references to classical mythology in a manner not particularly dissimilar to the *Stanze*. For example, Sonnet I refers to Phoebus Apollo twice (4 and 8), Sonnet II reinterprets the myth of Apollo and Clyzia, with Simonetta playing the role of the Sun, whilst the world that she has left behind becomes the abandoned nymph. Sonnet III depicts *Amore*, the Graces and the Muses crying over Simonetta (12-13), deities of love and beauty who would not be out of place in the *Stanze*'s representation of the noblewoman. Love (e.g. I, 40) and Thalia, Muse of comedy and Grace of festivity (I, 45, 1) are in fact connected to her in Poliziano's poem. Furthermore, in the 'Nuovo Argumento' she is specifically connected to Venus, deemed to be the 'stella di Venere' (611). Lorenzo, not unlike Poliziano, is therefore using mythology to stress Simonetta's beauty and loving nature, and to lend his work a classical aspect that at once emphasises his own erudition and the importance of ancient culture to fifteenth-century Florence. He also uses a number of intertextual references to works of Latin literature to underline these points. For instance, Sonnet III's depiction of Clyzia is heavily influenced by Book IV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which contains the most famous retelling of the legend. In addition, the impact of Martial's and Statius' descriptions of the death of Glaucias, in *Epigrams* VI, 28 and 29 and *Silvae*, II, 1 respectively, can be felt throughout Lorenzo's depiction of Simonetta, and in his picturing of a city in mourning for the loss of a young person who embodied both great beauty and outstanding virtue (Martelli 1996: 69-70).

Unlike in the *Stanze*, however, the classical facets of the *Comento* are worked into a clearly signposted Ficinian superstructure that builds on Platonic theories of love. This is evident from the 'Proemio' onwards, in which Lorenzo defends his decision to spend his time 'nel

comporre e nel commentare cose non degne di fatica o di tempo alcuno, per essere passione amorose etc' (569). His defence against such criticisms is to cite Platonic and Ficinian doctrine on the necessity and virtuous outcomes of ideal love. For example, love in this sense is 'sopra tutto cagione d'invitare gli uomini a cose degne et eccellenti, et essercitare e ridurre in atto quelle virtù che in potenza sono nell'anima nostra' (569-570), and is nothing more than an 'appetito di bellezza' (570). Since 'nessuna cosa è più naturale che l'appetito di unirsi con la cosa bella' (573), 'chi propone uno vero amore, di necessità propone grande perfezzione' (571). These Platonic concepts are felt throughout the 'Argumento'. Firstly, there is Lorenzo's affirmation that 'il principio della amorosa vita [procede] dalla morte', as 'la morte è principio a questa nostra opera' (590), an idea that can be found, as Zanato (1992: 590) points out, in philosophical tracts by Plato, Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. Moreover, in what Zanato terms a typical feature of Platonic texts (1979: 158), the sonnets and the commentary are filled with references to light. The depiction of Simonetta as a star, in Sonnets I and III and their commentaries, and as the Sun in Sonnet II are the most obvious examples. However, even the references to mythological characters are linked into this theme, as Roush points out (2002: 79-95), Apollo being connected to the Sun, and Cupid and the Graces to ideal love and beauty. This is all far more pointed than the *Stanze*'s vaguely Platonic connotations, and is as evident as Lorenzo's quotation of vernacular literature. He clearly intends to leave the reader with no doubt as to both his philosophical and vernacular influences. It is further proof that the *Comento* and its depiction of Simonetta are far more ostentatiously 'Florentine' than the *Stanze*.

More evidence for this is provided by the fact that the commentaries on the sonnets frequently cite Platonic ideas. For example, Ficino's comments in his *Libro dell'Amore* on the

eye being the window on the soul (1987: 190), the importance of the eyes in the process of falling in love (1987: 192), and the contemplation of divine beauty through the beloved (1987: 34-35) are reflected in the commentary to Sonnet I. Here, Simonetta's eyes, which the poem described as having been transformed into a star (5-7), become synonymous with her soul (594). Her beauty whilst alive was 'di gran conforto agli occhi nostri' (594), whilst comfort can now be found by contemplating the new star (594). This all fits with Ficino's stress upon the significance of eyes, vision and contemplation to virtuous love. The influence of the philosopher's assertion that the lover, having found an image of beauty, wishes to possess it, meaning that 'l'Amore tiene el mezzo tra la bellezza e la privatione di quella' (1987: 113) can be felt in the commentary to Sonnet II. Lorenzo draws upon these ideas by describing how those who loved Simonetta have been deprived of the *sight* of her, as Clyzia bemoans 'la privazione del lume del sole' (597). In addition, Ficino's assertion that, in looking at another human being, we see 'el corpo che è imagine e ombra dello animo' (1987: 153) evidently inspired Lorenzo's claim that death will once more allow Simonetta's 'lovers' to contemplate her beauty, even greater in heaven because 'la luce degli occhi umani è come ombra rispetto alle luce dell'anima' (598). A similar dynamic of vision and deprivation can be found in Lorenzo's observations of the effect of the 'la perpetua privazione della cosa amata' (600) on a lover in the commentary to Sonnet III. Moreover, Lorenzo's depiction of the contradictory emotions of people who are in love in the commentary to Sonnet IV (602) draws on Ficino's interest in the subject (1987: 35).

The most persuasive evidence of the influence of Ficinian thought in the *Comento*, as Martelli (1996: 67-68) points out, comes at the beginning of the 'Nuovo Argumento', in which Lorenzo explains that Simonetta was, for him, not the object of a 'privata e grande passione', but

rather that he was moved to mourn her death in verse by ‘uno dolore e compassione che molti e molti altri mosse nella città nostra (606-607). Imagining the emotions of those who truly loved Simonetta in order to compose his sonnets, he explains, he began to search for another such lady who would be worthy of his love (607). This leads to the discovery of his own idealised beloved, who then dominates the rest of the work.

Fu adunque la vita e morte di colei [Simonetta] [...] a me notizia universale di amore e cognizione in confuso che cosa fussi amorosa passione [...]

(600)

Simonetta has therefore allowed Lorenzo to leave behind his ‘cammino [...] cieco’ (612), ‘voltare gli occhi in cielo’ and discover the ‘splendore celeste’ (612) of love. As the poet explains in his ‘Proemio’, this ideal love ‘secondo Platone, è mezzo a tutte le cose’, and is nothing other than the universal desire to return to the ‘suprema bellezza, cioè Dio’ (570). This clearly refers to the Platonic and Ficinian idea that, knowingly or unknowingly, the lover is drawn to the ray of divine light and beauty that he perceives in the object of his affections (Ficino 1987: 34-35). Simonetta is therefore crucial to understanding the *Comento*’s Ficinian message, which could hardly be more pronounced. Lorenzo’s Simonetta is, therefore, as with Poliziano’s, a composite creation, but one which unambiguously fuses the great Florentine poetic and philosophical traditions in ‘un rinnovato manierismo stilnovista’, as Gorni puts it (1994: 205), which openly aims to ennoble the Tuscan language. She is, as Schmitter comments (1995: 42), a ‘civic symbol’, and the creation of Florentine ‘patriotism’.

Simonetta as a political creation

As one might expect from a text written by Lorenzo, a man who was so adept at creating his own mythology (Kent 2004: 3; Bullard 1994: vii), and at understanding the political potential of culture (Bullard 1994: 51), this presentation of Simonetta cannot have been without a political motive. In order to understand this use of Simonetta, we must return to Lorenzo's insistence in the 'Proemio' that the Tuscan *volgare* 'potrebbe facilmente, nella iuventù e adulta età sua, venire in maggiore perfezzione' (584). We have seen that Lorenzo is openly attempting to create this new, greater style in the *Comento*, and particularly so in the figure of Simonetta, who combines vernacular and classicising influences to become symbolic of Florence's poetic and intellectual heritage. As previously mentioned, Lorenzo links the development of Florence's poetry to the expansion of the 'fiorentino imperio' (584), making a clear connection between literary and political success. For the sake of Florence's citizens, one should not only wish for these triumphs, but aid their fruition 'con tutto l'ingegno e forze' (584). Lorenzo, if he had not actually increased the size of Florence's empire, had certainly helped to save the city's territory by negotiating an end to the War of the Pazzi Conspiracy in a daring journey to Naples in late 1479 and early 1480⁶¹. This, along with his promotion in the *Comento* of the supremacy of Florence's cultural heritage and his attempts to make the city's language even greater, allows him to demonstrate that he has the city's best interests at heart, and is harnessing his political and poetic abilities for its good.

Lorenzo is careful to add this effect in the 'Proemio' through his continued appeals to the patriotic pride of his readers, evidently primarily envisioned as being Florentine. For example,

⁶¹ See Bryce 2002: 24 for more details of Florence's relationship with Naples and Lorenzo's mission to the city.

the *volgare* is ‘la nostra materna lingua’ (577), whilst Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio are ‘nostri poeti fiorentini’ (581). In this manner Lorenzo implies that he is writing to and for his fellow citizens, thereby demonstrating his love for them. This flows seamlessly into Lorenzo’s portrayal of the collective grief felt by the city at the death of Simonetta, from the opening phrase of the ‘Argumento’, in which he explains that his first four sonnets were inspired by ‘la morte d’una donna’, which provoked ‘le lacrime universalmente dagli occhi di tutti gli uomini e donne che di lei ebbono alcuna notizia’ (589). This insistence upon the general mourning in Florence caused by Simonetta’s death is emphasised throughout the ‘Argumento’, and on into the ‘Nuovo Argumento’. For instance, Lorenzo states that Simonetta died ‘nella città nostra’, an event that inspired the compassion of ‘tutto il popolo fiorentino’ (591). Not only this, but she was ‘carissima’ to both men and women, without causing any jealousy (592), in a notably positive portrayal of the emotions of his fellow Florentines. Her funeral, moreover, is a public event. Carried from her home to her place of burial uncovered, a crowd rushes to see her, all of whom are moved to tears, either by youth and beauty in death, or, if they did not know her, by bitter regret that they now will never have the chance to do so (592-593). Since late-fifteenth century Florence was a ‘small face-to-face society, whose members constantly crossed paths in the daily performance of a whole range of activities, both public and private’ (Kent 2009: 6), it would seem logical to suppose that Lorenzo is depicting, and appealing to the memories of many of his fellow citizens in this description. This communal disaster clearly merited the literary outpouring that, along with grief, it inspired. As Lorenzo puts it, ‘tutti e fiorentini ingegni’ mourned and praised her, whether in verse or prose, ‘tra li quali io ancora volsi essere e accompagnare le lacrime loro con li infrascritti sonetti’ (593). Notably, Lorenzo is presenting himself here not as the influential elder brother of Simonetta’s ‘lover’, nor in the role of patron to the ‘fiorentini

ingegni' who are described as writing about her. He is portraying himself, rather, as one among many, no different from the others who have bemoaned her passing and, as the verb 'accompagnare' suggests, perhaps even inferior to them, humbly adding his voice to those who have already exercised their literary talents in praising her.

In his sonnets and commentary he then portrays himself as experiencing what he has previously described as the typical Florentine reaction to Simonetta, and to her death: love, admiration, and grief. In Sonnet I and its commentary, Lorenzo depicts himself as 'parlando di questa comune iattura' with a friend (594), which allows him once more to use first person plural pronouns and possessives, in order to lend his expressions of grief and admiration the communal flavour of the 'Proemio' and of the beginning of the 'Argumento'. For example, he depicts Simonetta's eyes as having been 'di gran conforto agli occhi nostri', and exhorts his companion, 'confortiamogli al presente con la visione di questa chiarissima stella [...] preghiamo el nume, cioè la divinità sua' (594). In Sonnets II-IV, Lorenzo goes on to depict himself as one of the 'tanti uomini' (592) who loved Simonetta. Moreover, he mourns her to mark the 'dolore molto universale e comune' brought about in Florence by her death (606-607). As Lorenzo comments, 'mi sforzai, per meglio soddisfare a me e a quelli che grandissima e privata passione avevono della sua morte, propormi inanzi agli occhi di avere ancora io perduto una carissima cosa' (607). He is presenting himself, therefore, as the selfless, respectful spokesperson for Florence's collective grief, at once keeping the memory of Simonetta alive and ennobling the city's vernacular tradition. He casts himself not as a ruler here, but as a concerned citizen, documenting the emotions of his fellow Florentines in manner that paints him in a sympathetic light.

At the same time, though, it should be noted that Lorenzo is also portraying himself as a Platonic-style philosopher king, ‘capable of apprehending that which is eternal and unchanging’ (Plato, *Republic*, VI. 484b) and a lover of ‘truth’ (VI. 485c). He presents himself as a man who has not yet experienced the ideal love that has nothing to do with the senses, and everything to do with ‘l’acostarsi a Ddio’ (Ficino 1987: 12), achieved by contemplating ‘quel fulgore della divinità risplendente nel corpo bello’ (1987: 34-35). Simonetta, by becoming his ‘notizia universale di amore’ (606), is the ‘chiara stella’ (Sonnet I, 1) who allows him to experience the ‘splendore celeste’ (612) of the divine beauty that is ‘la gratia di questo mondo’ (Ficino 1987: 12). As Roush points out, moreover, the figure of Apollo, associated with coming to know oneself, is central to Lorenzo’s sonnets on Simonetta (2002: 88). This is a Lorenzo who never once mentions his dominant status in Florence, but who presents himself as a wise and chaste lover, able to contemplate the higher truth of divine beauty, and seemingly uninterested in more earthly concerns, such as retaining power over the city.

It would be a mistake, however, to view the *Comento* as being aimed solely and exclusively at Lorenzo’s fellow Florentines. It is highly likely that its depictions of the greatness of Florence’s culture and of Lorenzo himself were intended to impress upon outsiders the greatness of the city’s intellectual achievements, and those of its rulers. Given that the Tuscan vernacular was becoming an increasingly dominant force in the peninsula as a whole (Shapiro 1973: 446) the *Comento* would have had a potential readership throughout Italy. As Judith Bryce argues persuasively, it is probable that the depiction of Simonetta in the *Comento* played an important role in the cultural diplomacy that took place between Florence and Naples in the 1480s. As she points out, Simonetta was connected to the southern city through her brother-in-

law, Jacopo III Appiani d' Aragona, lord of Piombino and related by marriage to the Neapolitan king, who had arranged her marriage and paid her dowry (16). The Vespucci were also linked to Naples, due to the ambassadorial role that several members of the family had played there, including Piero di Giuliano, Simonetta's father-in-law (18). By 1477, Lorenzo's sonnets on Simonetta had already been included in the *Raccolta Aragonesa*, an anthology of Italian vernacular poetry sent to Federico d' Aragona, as relations between the formerly allied cities deteriorated (20-21). As Bryce comments, the inclusion of Lorenzo's 'Simonetta sonnets' in the *Raccolta* also coincided with the marriage of her nephew, Jacopo IV Appiani, to the granddaughter of the King of Naples, Ferrante, and with the proposed match between Giuliano de' Medici and her niece, Semiramide Appiani, not to mention with Jacopo Appiani's decision to give the Medici exclusive rights to the iron ore mines on his territory of Elba (21-22). The *Comento* itself, as mentioned previously, dates from no earlier than 1480, the period that followed the Pazzi Conspiracy, the ensuing war between Florence and Naples, Lorenzo's 1480 journey to the latter city in order to broker peace, and a vast improvement in relations between the cities (11, 25).

Simonetta in the *Comento*, whatever her other meanings [...] represents a deliberate reappropriation of, and reinvestment in, a woman whose father-in-law had come under suspicion in the immediate aftermath of the conspiracy, and whose nephew, Jacopo IV d' Appiano, had fought on the Neapolitan side in the ensuing war.

(Bryce 2002: 26-27)

Simonetta's appearance in the *Comento*, then, is evidently connected to the complex relationship between Florence and Naples that characterised this period, and with Florence's need to impress upon its more powerful ally 'alternative claims to supremacy in other fields, linguistic as well as literary' (Bryce 2002: 23). Given the political motives underlying the *Comento*, Martelli's assertion that 'seppur nel travestimento di un romanzo d'amore, il *Comento* altro non era ed altro non voleva essere che un trattato filosofico' (1965: 107) appears far too idealistic.

Simonetta as iconic

By bringing together the literary, linguistic and political threads of sections one and two, we can come to some further conclusions as to Simonetta's role in the *Comento* and its relationship with Poliziano's portrayal of her in the *Stanze*. As we shall see, just as the work takes the *Stanze*'s political messages and poetic ideal of womanhood a step further, so it develops Poliziano's presentation of Simonetta as a symbolic figure of the supposed flowering of Laurentian Florence. Lorenzo was aided in this task by the possibilities created by both her death and that of his brother Giuliano, the recipient and focus of several of the poems written on Simonetta, and presumably a reminder in Medici circles of her living presence. It is notable that, whilst Poliziano's depiction of Simonetta was based largely on Petrarchan norms of beauty and gave little idea of the 'real woman', Lorenzo's portrayal is even more abstracted. Reading his lengthy depiction of her at the beginning of the 'Argumento', it quickly becomes clear that Lorenzo is intent on using only the most generalised of terms to depict her, and avoids her name entirely. Simonetta was 'di bellezze e gentilezze umane [...] veramente ornata' (591). She had

many ‘eccellenti dote’, and a ‘dolce e attrattiva maniera’(592). Lorenzo uses the terms ‘bellezza’, ‘biltà’ and ‘bella’ no less than six times from 591-593, without providing any more details as to her appearance. Furthermore, as discussed in section one, his description of Simonetta is so closely modelled on Dante’s depiction of Beatrice as to separate her from ‘reality’ altogether. The sonnets and the commentary upon them only add to this effect. In Sonnet I, Simonetta is transfigured into a ‘stella’ (1, 9). She is the metaphorical Sun to Florence’s Clyzia in Sonnet II, and an ‘eccellentissima donna’ (595) and ‘gentilissima’ (597) in the commentary. She appears once more as a star (6) and merely as ‘colei’ (5) in Sonnet III, and is ‘colei’, ‘una cosa gentilissima’ and Lorenzo’s ‘sole’ (600) in its accompanying prose. In Sonnet IV, she is not referred to directly at all, and in its commentary is no more than ‘lei’, and the obligatory ‘gentilissima’ (604). In the words of Crivelli, noting the typical presentation of women in Italian poetry over the centuries, she is ‘dall’identità “incerta ed elusiva”’, an ““evanescente fantasma” dalle “rare epifanie” e dalle “lunghe eclisse”’, ““angelo” e “dea”, ‘defunta’, ‘trasfigurata’, ‘metamorfizzata’, and a ‘modello di virtù per le donne’ (2007: 7-8).

Her death, as can be seen from the above description, allows Lorenzo to transform her, much like Dante’s Beatrice, into an angelic, idealised figure, free from the taint of earthly vice. As Gilbert and Gubar put it, referring to Milton’s poetic depiction of his dead wife, she has ‘taken on both the celestial brightness of Mary and [...] the virginal purity of Beatrice’ (2000: 21). For these critics, ‘it is just because women are defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power [...] that they become numinous to male artists. For in the metaphysical emptiness their “purity” signifies they are [...] *self-less*’ (2000: 21). There is no surrender of self or state of passivity greater than death (2000: 25). In line with this explanation of the fascination

that young, beautiful and dead women have exerted over poets for centuries, Simonetta, having done her duty, and opened Lorenzo's eyes to divine love, must sacrifice herself so that he can meet Lucrezia, and practise what he has learned (611-612). She must lose *her self* so that Lorenzo can find his, and become a saintly star-like figure in the process.

Indeed, Simonetta in the *Comento* is angelic in both her beauty and her manners. What is stressed, in fact, is Simonetta's effect on the Florentines among whom she lived, from their sensation of each being 'da essa sommamente [...] amati' (592), to the praise and love bestowed upon her by both men and women (592), to the 'dolore molto universale e comune' (606) felt at her death, climaxing in her public funeral (592-593). Simonetta may have been exceptional in life and in death, but there is no sense here, in contrast to the *Stanze*, that this stems from a quasi-divine, elemental force; there is not even any acknowledgement that this fusion of Florence's great literary and philosophical traditions was, in fact, from Liguria. Rather, in her beauty, virtue and early death, she is rooted in the context of the city, the major variant from the dynamic of love and loss proposed by Dante and Petrarch residing in the fact that she is presented as being the object of grief and affection not for one man alone but for an entire population. Moreover, her death, although it causes much grief, does not represent the loss of Lorenzo's beloved, but his discovery of her (that is, Lucrezia), signalling a departure from the structure of the *Vita Nuova* that gives the *Comento* a far more positive tone.

Simonetta is, indeed, an essentially optimistic figure in the *Comento*. Throughout the 'Argumento', in fact, she is associated with light, as Roush (2002: 79) points out. In Sonnet I she is star so bright that 'potrebbe contendere con Phebo e domandarli il suo carro, per essere auttrice lei del giorno' (594). The commentary lays a particular emphasis on her light-giving qualities,

with its repetition of terms such as ‘chiarissima stella’ and ‘splendore’ (594). She is presented in this form, moreover, as a source of wonder, ‘gran conforto’ and contemplation (594). She is associated with the Sun and with Apollo in Sonnet II (lines 6 and 10), with terms such as ‘luce’ and ‘lume’ (597) in the commentary, and is depicted as shining more brilliantly in death than in life (598). In Sonnet III not only is she once more ‘del ciel la più lucente stella’ (line 6), but she is also Lorenzo’s ‘sole’ (601). The conclusion to this theme is reached in the ‘Nuovo Argumento’, with the poet’s identification of Simonetta with the ‘stella di Venere’, or ‘Lucifer’⁶² (611).

Mostrommi il morto *Lucifer* che presto doveva venire questo mio novello sole, e, come abbiamo detto, scorse el cammino mio cieco alla visione di tanto splendore; e, poi che ebbe assuefatti gli occhi miei a vedere lo splendore della sua stella, cioè splendore celeste, sentendo il sole sopravvenire si spense, e io, che per lei avevo cominciato a voltare gli occhi in cielo, con manco offensione della vista mia gli pote’ traducere dal lume della stella allo splendore del sole.

(612)

The Platonic implications of this depiction of Simonetta, and its figuring of her as Giovanna, or *Primavera*, announcing to Lorenzo the arrival of his own *Vita nuova*, have already been discussed. If we now take into account the political messages that underscore the *Comento*, the state of Florence’s foreign affairs at the time, and Lorenzo’s appeal to a sense of Florentine identity through his portrayal of Simonetta, it may be possible to take these ideas further. In a Florence that was regaining its stability following the Pazzi Conspiracy and the ensuing war, Simonetta is here being presented as a beacon of Florentine hope and identity for all of its

⁶² See note 5 for an explanation of this term.

citizens. For Poliziano she is a vision of Spring in a fresh new world of Laurentian dominance. For Lorenzo, *Primavera* is completely transfigured, not only representative of the troubles of the 1470s in the depiction of the grief caused by her death and in her connection, via Giuliano, to the Pazzi Conspiracy, but also an iconic, shining star who illuminates Florence's future and speaks to the promise of renewal in 1480s Florence under a leader who had recently proved his worth in his daring and successful journey to Naples. She also represents the dawning of a new, greater style in Tuscan vernacular poetry, a continuation both of the work of Petrarch and Dante, and of more recent cultural developments in the city, such as the poetry of Poliziano and the increasing interest in Platonic philosophy. The world of 1470s Florence, as symbolised by Poliziano's Simonetta, may have been left behind, but, Lorenzo implies, it was the beginning of even greater things, under a ruler who has, as conveyed via his metaphorical relationship with Simonetta in the *Comento*, matured into a philosopher-king, older, sadder and wiser. Both Poliziano's and Lorenzo's depictions of Simonetta, then, address the changing political and cultural needs of 1470s and 1480s Florence. The poets' aims are not identical; it is not that Lorenzo is more successful in making Simonetta 'shine', as implied by Carrai (2007: 8), but neither is it true that there is no link between the texts as Orvieto asserts (2009: 249), since Lorenzo is clearly building on her depiction in the earlier work in order to transform her into an iconic figure for his own political and poetic ends.

Conclusion

Lorenzo's portrayal of Simonetta in the *Comento* is, therefore, designed to address what he considered to be the literary and political necessities of the day. She is the focal point around which to rejuvenate the Tuscan language and to inspire a sense of Florentine identity and patriotic pride, which needed to be reinforced following the Pazzi Conspiracy; she allows Lorenzo to portray himself both as a responsible citizen and a wise ruler, whose emotions, concerns and ambitions are one with those of the city; she permits him to impress upon other nations the greatness of Florence's literary achievements, whilst helping to repair the alliance with Naples. Fundamentally, she becomes Florence's shining star, symbolic of both the triumphs and disasters of the 1470s and of the promise of hope and renewal in a city that was regaining its stability. Lorenzo is building on Poliziano's envisioning of Simonetta as the Spring-like representative of the flowering of Laurentian Florence in order to transform her into his vision of *Primavera*: an iconic figure who symbolises the political and cultural rebirth of 1480s Florence under his wise rule. But how do works by the 'minor' poets who wrote about Simonetta relate to the *Stanze* and the *Comento*? Does Simonetta continue to be employed as a symbol for the city? Or do they attempt to use Simonetta in entirely different ways?

CHAPTER THREE

‘QUANTE PENNE STRACHARSI INCHIOSTRI ET CARTE’:

SIMONETTA IN THE WORKS OF ‘MINOR’ FLORENTINE POETS

Introduction

In this chapter I shall analyse the six works composed in the vernacular by ‘minor’ Florentine poets that commemorate Simonetta’s life and death, and were written in the month following the 26 April 1476⁶³. Two⁶⁴ of these are by Bernardo Pulci, younger brother of Lorenzo’s great childhood friend, Luigi. The first is the funereal elegy ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive’, which, at a length of 64 *terzine*, is by far the longest poem of the group. Here, an array of classical deities mourns the beautiful, virtuous Simonetta (1- 10), along with her relations and native city of Genova (16). Fourteen stanzas (26- 39) are devoted to depicting her noble, pious death, following which Bernardo depicts at length the devastation provoked by it (43- 54). He finishes his poem by describing the honour with which Simonetta is received in paradise, and the glory still accorded to her on Earth, concluding that her death should be celebrated rather than lamented (55- 64). His sonnet ‘Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra’ is written in the persona of

⁶³ This means that the two other works in the vernacular that mention Simonetta will not be dealt with in this chapter, but in my PhD thesis. These are ‘Francisci Nursii Timidei Veronensis Regii Secretarii Carmen austerum in funere Symonette Vespucciae Florentinae: Ad illuxtrissimum Alphonsum Calabrie Ducem’, whose author, as the title makes clear, was from Verona; and Tommaso Sardi’s religious epic *De Anima Peregrina*, since it was composed from 1493- 1515, many years after Simonetta’s death.

⁶⁴ A number of scholars (Bryce 2002: 11; Simioni 1908: 690; Cortese 1979: 529) refer to a second sonnet by Bernardo, which I have as yet been unable to trace. It may possibly be the anonymous ‘Quanto studio poté natura, et arte’, given that it is the only other ‘Simonetta poem’ to be found in the same manuscript (Riccard. 2823) as ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive’ and ‘Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra’. I have no proof of this, however. I shall attempt to resolve the issue in the course of my doctoral studies.

Simonetta, who addresses Giuliano from this heavenly realm, and consoles him with the thought that she is waiting for him to join her (12- 14), and that in the meantime he must dry his eyes, since his cries are causing her grief (1- 4; 9- 11). Luigi Pulci's sonnet, 'Com'hai tu, crudel Morte, un sì bel viso', on the other hand, rails against the senseless cruelty of death, which has deprived the world of such beauty (1-4), and attempts to rationalise the terrible event (9- 14). Girolamo Benivieni, at the time a young poet of some success in Medici circles, contributes two sonnets, 'Sparito, occhi miei lassi, è'l nostro sole', and 'Se morto vive anchor colui ch'in vita'. The first, written in the persona of Giuliano, depicts the younger Medici brother as mourning his loss (1-4) and his own earthly state of blindness (5- 8), and hoping to see Simonetta in heaven when the veil that dims his mortal eyes will have been removed (9- 14). The second consoles him with the thought that Simonetta's soul has been released from the evils of the world and has returned to its Maker (5- 14). Finally, the anonymous sonnet 'Quanto studio poté natura, et arte' bemoans death's destruction of such a perfect creation of beauty, grace and manners (1- 4), describes the tears shed and verses composed for Simonetta (5- 8), laments the power of fate (9- 11), and concludes with the assertion that either Simonetta should not have been born or, born as she was, should not have been allowed to die (12- 14).

In this chapter I shall compare these portrayals of Simonetta to those of Poliziano and Lorenzo, assessing their reactions to the new ideal of femininity created in the *Stanze*, how far the works are connected to the Medici, if they depict the 'flourishing' of Laurentian Florence, whether they can be said to be patriotic, to what extent Simonetta is employed for political purposes, and if she is depicted as iconic. It will become clear that Bernardo Pulci's elegy is the most 'modern' of the poems, working with the paradigm of womanhood and the floral imagery

used in the *Stanze*, flattering of the Medici, and transforming Simonetta into a symbol of the ‘renewal’ of culture taking place in Laurentian Florence. His sonnet, on the other hand, along with those of Benivieni and Luigi Pulci, is far more conventional in form and language, following Petrarchan and other vernacular traditions, and determinedly ignoring or rejecting the new style of poetry. Only the more classicising ‘Quanto studio poté natura, et arte’ responds more positively to it. On the other hand, all of the poems contain aspects that correspond to the works of Poliziano and Lorenzo, be it in their descriptions of the universal grief inspired by Simonetta’s death or in their depictions of her as an angelic figure who has ascended to heaven. All, furthermore, can be said to be contributing to the ‘revival’ of the vernacular in the fact that they were composed in the language, at a time when literature *in mortem* was often restricted to Latin and Greek.

The creation of a new ideal of femininity?

In Chapter One we observed that Poliziano’s Simonetta, an intricate combination of vernacular, classical and Ficinian source material, represented the creation of a new ideal of femininity inspired by Laurentian notions of *fiorentinità*. It takes little more than a cursory glance at representations of Simonetta by ‘minor’ Florentine poets to see that whilst some are influenced by the *Stanze*, others bear little or no traces of it. Bernardo Pulci’s ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive’ has most in common with it. Firstly, it is a funereal elegy. Although this verse form is different from a mini-epic such as the *Stanze* in rhyme scheme and tone, the fact that, as Williamson points out, it emerged in the late fifteenth century and was meant to recall Latin verse forms such as the

distich (1950: 554) places it in the same, modernising category. Moreover, much as Poliziano's poems draws on the conventions of both classical and vernacular epic, Bernardo's use of *terza rima* bears the hallmarks of other Tuscan works structured around *terzine*, such as Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Petrarch's *Trionfi*. There are, indeed, echoes of vernacular poetry throughout 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive'. For example, stanzas 27-44 are clearly meant to recall Petrarch's 'Triumphus Mortis' in their depiction of Death's timidity in Simonetta's presence (27), the 'mesto collegio' (28, 2) gathered around her bed, her calm acceptance of death and rejection of life (30- 37), and her seeming sleep (40. 3)⁶⁵. The poem's references to mythology are equally pointed. Not unlike Poliziano, Bernardo connects Simonetta to classical gods and goddesses. For instance, in *terzina* 1 he describes how 'sacre e gloriose dive' (1), including the Graces (2), who were connected to Simonetta in I. 45. 1 of the *Stanze*, mourn her. Simonetta has left them as 'vedove lasse' (2. 3), since she was their 'tempio' (3. 1), fashioned with their own hands (3. 2). Indeed, Venus gave her beauty, Minerva intelligence, and Mercury eloquence (6). Bernardo's Simonetta, much like Poliziano's, is therefore connected to beauty, sensuality, chastity and intelligence through the classical deities associated with her. Both Laura and a classical nymph (64. 1), this Simonetta adheres to the ideal of femininity present in the *Stanze*.

Bernardo's willingness to adapt to this new cultural climate is unsurprising, since he appears to have been comfortable in it. Unlike his brothers, Luca and Luigi, poets who did not adapt their work to the Laurentian style of poetry, Bernardo was modern in his literary tastes and a friend of Ficino (Carrai 1985: 7). Moreover, whilst Luigi feuded with Ficino and was eventually

⁶⁵ In the 'Triumphus Mortis' ['Triumph of Death] Death offers to let Laura die without pain or fear (I, 68-69), a number of women are gathered around her to contemplate her end (I, 109-111), and death is 'quasi un dolce dormir ne' suo' belli occhi' (I, 169). Appearing to the poet in a vision, she remarks upon her joy in having left life and returned to God (II, 23-25 and 32-40).

marginalised by Lorenzo, Bernardo received one of the four letters attacking Luigi composed by the translator and philosopher (see *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Vol. 1, Letter 113, pp. 168-169). In addition, as is demonstrated by Luigi's many letters to Lorenzo in happier days, the Pulci family finances were disastrous, meaning that the brothers were reliant upon the patronage of the Medici⁶⁶. As is demonstrated by a letter of 27 October 1473, in which he asks Lorenzo to persuade Luigi to marry (Pulci 1882: 23- 24), Bernardo was himself in contact with the Medici ruler, and presumably one of his clients. He even dedicated his *Canzoniere* to him (Simioni 1908: 690), and composed a number of works celebrating the family⁶⁷. It would, therefore, not be unlikely if one of Bernardo's motivations in creating a Simonetta so like Poliziano's was the need to compete for patronage with the poet from Montepulciano.

'Quanto studio poté natura et arte' adheres to a somewhat similar aesthetic. Although written in the more conventional sonnet form, it mirrors Poliziano's method of imitation through its interweaving of echoes of vernacular literature and of the ancient world. For example, whilst the exclamatory phrase, 'quanti poi d'Elicone derivar fiumi' (7), refers to Mount Helicon, home of the Muses, it also derives from Petrarch's *RVF*. VII. 8, which describes a poet as 'chi vòl far d'Elicona nascer fiumi'⁶⁸. Furthermore, the poet's cries against the 'crudel Parcha' (9) who has allowed Simonetta to die reflects both classical notions of Fate, and similar accusations of injustice in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (CCX. 6 and CCXCVI. 5). Finally, the poet depicts Simonetta

⁶⁶ See, for example, a letter dated February 1466(?), in which Luigi begs Lorenzo for financial assistance, for the sake of both himself and Bernardo (Pulci 1868: 14-18).

⁶⁷ E.g. 'Bernardo Pulci per la morte di Giovanni di Cosimo', 'Bernardo per la morte di Cosimo de' Medici a Lorenzo', 'Bernardo Pulci a Piero de' Medici fatta la pace del 1468, parlando con la patria, co' figliuoli e con esso Piero', 'Bernardo Pulci a Lorenzo de' Medici', 'Canzona a Lorenzo de' Medici per la novità di Firenze nel 1466, parlando con la patria, sendo in Sicilia' (see Lanza 1975).

⁶⁸ As Chiari (2009: 59) explains, 'L'Elicona è il monte sacro ad Apollo e, quindi, alla poesia; da quel monte derivarono due fiumi, Aganippe e Ippocrene, portatori ed alimentatori di poesia'.

as crossing the Styx (12), evoking Greek and Roman beliefs about the afterlife, along with references to the river in Dante's *Inferno* (e.g. *Inf.* VII. 106). Much like in the *Stanze* and 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive', moreover, Simonetta is here described as having beauty and grace (2).

Bernardo's second, confirmed poem on Simonetta, 'Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra', breaks with this ideal of femininity, suggesting that the new, Laurentian style of poetry was so much in its infancy as to be neglected at times by its own proponents. In both its sonnet form and its language, the poem imitates Petrarch to such a degree that Neri (1885: 146) almost goes so far as to accuse it of plagiarism. To give but one example of many, the last three lines of the sonnet, in which Simonetta insists that Giuliano is crying over one who is alive and waiting for him in heaven, echoes similar assertions made by Laura in the 'Triumphus Mortis' (e.g. II, 23- 25). There is nothing in this depiction of Simonetta that links her to the classical world. It is as if Bernardo is 'hedging his bets', complying with both the old and new styles of poetry in the hope that one poem at least will please his patron. He is also demonstrating his ability to write Petrarchan verse, as if he had read other vernacular poems on Simonetta, noticed their more conventional tone, and decided to make his own *Trecento*-inspired contribution to the outpouring of poetic grief, so as not to be outdone in either form. Moreover, 'Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra' is proof of the continuing importance of Petrarchan love poetry to the depiction of women in Florence and in Italy as a whole, even to those who were pioneering new styles of verse.

Luigi Pulci's 'Com'hai tu, crudel Morte, un sì bel viso', is closer in theme and form to his brother's sonnet than his to elegy, and is again very reliant on Petrarchan language. For instance, both sonnets use the phrase 'chiude e serra' (lines 3 and 8 respectively), originally from the *Trecento* poet's *RVF*. CCC. 5. Moreover, variations on Luigi's rhyming of 'terra' (2), 'serra' (3),

‘guerra’ (6) and ‘sferra’ (7) can be found in no less than sixteen of the poems in Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*⁶⁹, not to mention in the ‘Triumphus Cupidinis’⁷⁰, the ‘Triumphus Mortis’⁷¹, the ‘Triumphus Fame’⁷², and the ‘Triumphus Eternitatis’⁷³. Interestingly, despite his reputation as an atheist (Hankins 2004: 250), Luigi is the only one of the ‘Simonetta poets’ to refer directly to God (13). Unsurprisingly, however, given Luigi’s bitter feud with Ficino (see Lebano 1974 for further details) and his lampooning of the philosopher in his *Morgante* (Orvieto 1978: 254), there is nothing more Platonic here than one would anticipate in a poem founded on a Tuscan poetic tradition that was influenced by the ‘general Platonic concepts’ of the works of Christian thinkers such as Augustine (Storey 2003: 610). In addition, Simonetta is a very vague figure in the poem, which is more concerned with rationalising her death than with describing her. With her ‘bel viso’ (1) and ‘duo sancti spiracul’ (3), Simonetta becomes one of the idealised women of the Petrarchan and stilnovistic traditions⁷⁴, the beauty of whose body and soul is emphasised in metaphor but never delineated. Simonetta is therefore used by Luigi as a pretext through which to declare his opposition to Florence’s increasing interest in Platonism, and to the cultural changes that were taking place in the city.

The poems of Girolamo Benivieni are interesting for a number of reasons. There is little in either of his sonnets on Simonetta, ‘Sparito, occhi miei lassi, è ’l nostro sole’ and ‘Se morto vive anchor colui ch’in vita’, to suggest a classical influence. This is despite the fact that scholars have tended to associate him with the so-called ‘Platonic Academy’ (e.g. Roush 2002: 96-98),

⁶⁹ XXVI, XXXVI, LIII, LXXII, CX, CXXVII, CXXVIII, CXXXIV, CCLII, CCLXIV, CCLXVIII, CCLXXV, CCC, CCCII, CCCXLVII and CCCLX.

⁷⁰ ‘Triumph of Love’, IV, 41-45.

⁷¹ I, 2-6.

⁷² ‘Triumph of Fame’, I, 107-111.

⁷³ ‘Triumph of Eternity’, 140-144.

⁷⁴ See Pozzi 1979: 6-7 for a detailed breakdown of these traditions.

and that he later composed the Platonically inspired ‘Canzone dell’amor celeste e divino’, commented on by his great friend and fellow Neoplatonist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Moreover, he was clearly acquainted with and influenced by Poliziano, for whom he produced a copy in the *volgare* of the more famous poet’s Latin translation of Moschus’ ancient Greek text, *Amor fugitivus* (Kristeller 1967: 50)⁷⁵. Nevertheless, the language of his poems on Simonetta is clearly based upon vernacular conventions. For example, the first stanza of ‘Sparito, occhi miei lassi, è ’l nostro sole’ echoes the opening lines of Petrarch’s CCLXXV, both bemoaning the loss of the Sun. The idea that one can love another human being too much, found in line 2 of ‘Se morto vive anchor colui ch’in vita’, mirrors similar assertions in Petrarch’s *RVF*, CCLXIV. 107-108 and Dante’s *Vita Nuova* (XXXVIII. 1). Even if the poet’s insistence that Simonetta is happy in heaven and will eventually be reunited with those who loved her reflects the ancient *consolatio* tradition⁷⁶, the overriding tone is one of Christian piety and faith in a better world to come. Indeed, the sonnets are so focused on these ideas of human frailty and eternal life that Simonetta barely appears. In ‘Sparito, occhi miei lassi, è ’l nostro sole’ she is a Sun who has set (1), and in ‘Se morto vive anchor colui ch’in vita’ a beautiful (9) ‘anima gentil’ (6). These metaphorical descriptions are so generalised that they could refer to anyone, as is demonstrated by the fact that Benivieni re-used both sonnets after his ‘conversion’ to Savonarolism, neither being published in their original manuscript form. ‘Se morto vive anchor colui ch’in vita’ can now be found in Benivieni’s *Opere* under the title ‘Consolatoria a se medesimo per la morte di messer Domenico suo fratello’, whilst ‘Sparito, occhi miei lassi, è ’l nostro sole’ is Sonnet V in his *Commento*, in

⁷⁵ ‘Love the deserter’; see also Marco Villani’s *Marco Franco* of 1519, in which the poet refers to ‘il Poliziano, di virtù caldo,/ e ’l Benivieni, e ’l loro amico fido’ (quoted in Percopo 1897).

⁷⁶ See Ciecchi 2005 for a detailed study of the *consolatio*.

which it is defined as a poem on divine love⁷⁷. In these poems, then, Benivieni is clearly uninterested in either working with, or creating new ideals of, femininity. Since he was, as we have seen, interested in Platonic philosophy and classical verse, it is curious that he does not use Simonetta as a means to express this fascination, when other poets were doing just that. We could perhaps read his Simonetta as an assertion of intellectual independence, a reaction against the ostentatious classicism of writers such as Bernardo Pulci by a poet who was already well-respected in Laurentian and Neoplatonic circles, and so could perhaps afford to distinguish himself by taking a traditionally pious and consoling approach to Simonetta's death.

Whilst, therefore, 'Quanto studio poté natura, et arte', and most particularly Bernardo Pulci's 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive', work with the classicising and vernacular paradigm of womanhood embodied by Poliziano's Simonetta, the majority of the poems written on Simonetta in the *volgare* by Florentine poets do not adopt these developments. Instead, they work with Petrarchan, stilnovistic and Christian concepts of femininity, asserting their independence from, and even opposition to, the new style of poetry proposed by Poliziano and Lorenzo, or merely their ability to write skilfully in a number of genres. They appear to have been well-aware of their fellow poets' work on Simonetta, responding to it and reacting against it as though taking part in an unofficial tenson, using her as means through which to demonstrate their talent, underline their poetic allegiances, and declare their differences. Through Simonetta, we glimpse the rivalries and

⁷⁷ I here analyse the published versions of the poems, due to their comparative accessibility. It is clear from Percopo 1897: 2-6 that in order to transform 'Se morto vive anchor colui ch'in vita' (originally 'Se morto vive anchor colei ch'in vita') Benivieni had only to change the adjectives 'morta', 'colei' and 'grata' into their masculine forms, since the rest of the poem refers simply to an 'anima gentil' (6), applicable to either a man or a woman.

tensions, otherwise invisible⁷⁸, which must have been rife among these poets, living in a small, competitive society with a limited number of patrons⁷⁹.

It is clear that Simonetta is not simply a Neoplatonic icon, as argued by Ventrone (2007: 40- 47). Not only have we seen that there is far more to the *Comento* and the *Stanze* than the wish to put Ficinian doctrine on love into poetic practice, it is clear that to ‘minor’ Florentine poets writing on her in the vernacular she held no such meaning. The mere fact that Luigi Pulci, who hated Ficino, chose to write about her should do much to dispel any such propositions.

Simonetta and the Medici?

Chapter One explained how one of the main driving forces behind the *Stanze* is Poliziano’s need to flatter his Medici patrons. Many of the ‘minor’ Simonetta poems betray a similar motivation. As we have already seen, Bernardo Pulci, both through his brother and for his own sake, was closely connected to the Medici. It is therefore not surprising that his ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive’ is entitled ‘Bernardo Pulci a Giuliano de’ Medici nella morte della diva Simonetta’. Unlike the *Stanze*, there are no direct references to the Medici family in the text of the poem itself. However, Bernardo’s reference in *terzina* 17, whilst addressing Simonetta, to ‘quel tuo Febo al mondo senza sole,/ ch’avendo i giorni tuoi sempre onorati/ della sua Dampne si lamenta e dole’ suggests that he is figuring Giuliano in the role of Apollo and Simonetta in that of

⁷⁸ Disagreements between poets could also be enacted on a public footing. For example, Luigi Pulci and Matteo Franco exchanged a number of scathing sonnets (see Carrai 1985: 75- 84), whilst Poliziano is known to have feuded openly with poets such as Michele Marullo and Mabilius (see Kidwell 1989: 164- 165).

⁷⁹ As Martines puts it, ‘poetry in Quattrocento Florence blazes with personal abuse. It is the fire of an intense neighbourhood life where favour and advantage belonged to clusters of dependents and patrons’ (2001: 11).

Daphne, transforming them into an idealised, mythological couple. Indeed, given that the poem is written for the younger Medici brother, it would be strange if this was meant to recall another of her 'lovers'. This means that Bernardo does not present Giuliano merely as a classical hero, as does Poliziano, but is 'promoting' him to the level of Olympian god. This reinforces the impression that Bernardo is trying to outdo Poliziano. On the other hand, this imagery is somewhat confused by stanza 47, in which Simonetta's 'trece crespe e bionde' and 'bel viso' are described as having made 'Delio', or Apollo, forget his 'amate fronde' (that is, Daphne). Why Simonetta should be depicted as a replacement for herself, so to speak, is unclear. It may be that Bernardo intends this second reference to the god to be distinct from the first, simply a reference to the power of Simonetta's beauty. He is perhaps so intent on flattery that he contradicts himself. The motivation behind this hyperbolic assessment of her charms is less confusing, evidently designed to please his patron and to sympathise with his distress. Moreover, given that Simonetta is described as having had 'tante doti eccellenti, essimie e clare' (21. 2), as being full of rare virtue (2. 1) and as dying a 'good death' (26- 39), along with being of great beauty (e.g. 47- 48), this cannot but have reflected well on Giuliano, who was so closely associated with her. In addition, the poem is subtly flattering towards Lorenzo, since its final stanza depicts Simonetta as a 'benigna stella or su nel ciel gradita', whose light shines down on a bereft Florence (64. 2- 4). As Simioni points out, this is strikingly similar to Lorenzo's Sonnet I (1908: 691), in which she becomes the 'chiara stella' (I. 1) whose brightness is remarked upon by Lorenzo and his friend (*Comento*, 594). This is unlikely to have been coincidental, particularly given that Bernardo's transformation of Simonetta into a star seems to be at odds with the rest of the poem, in which this imagery is never used, except to portray the world as being contradictorily *without* 'i raggi di sua propizia stella' (or Simonetta) (54. 2). Bernardo is therefore expressing a (prominently-

located) poetic homage to the power of Lorenzo's own verse, allowing him to compete with Poliziano's success in praising both Medici brothers and Simonetta in his *Stanze*.

Bernardo's 'Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra' is also addressed to Giuliano ('Diva Simonetta a Giuliano de' Medici felix'). There are no direct references to the Medici in the poem, written in the persona of Simonetta with the purpose of consoling Giuliano's grief with the thought that she is waiting for him in heaven. However, the fact that she comforts him with the wisdom, virtue, patience and love of Laura, as the poem implies through its imitation of Petrarch, again reflects well on Giuliano, who is here portrayed as being the recipient of her, by implication, chaste affection. Moreover, she is thinking exclusively of him in heaven (14). In this poem, even following her death Giuliano has sole 'ownership' of her and of her memory. Moreover, if Simonetta is Laura, then Giuliano must be Petrarch, a symbol of Florentine achievement. This makes them, in both of Bernardo's poems, an ideal couple to rival Poliziano's presentation of them in his *Stanze*. Furthermore, we know from various sources that Giuliano wrote poetry and was interested in the 'Arts' in general,⁸⁰ so, by portraying him as Florence's greatest lyric poet, Bernardo is praising his literary abilities and refinement.

Benivieni's poems seem to be similarly influenced by the need to ingratiate himself with his Medici patrons. It is known that he came to Lorenzo's attention when he was only a teenager, for the quality of both his poetry and his musicianship (Roush 2002: 96-98). As Antonio Benivieni the Younger puts it in his *Vita di Girolamo Benivieni* (c. 1580), Lorenzo was 'preso sì fattamente' by Benivieni's work 'che volentieri si restringeva talvolta con esso la sera a'

⁸⁰ For example, Poliziano, in his *Della congiura de' Pazzi del'anno 1478*, describes Giuliano thus: 'della pittura massimamente, e della musica, e di ogni maniera di gentili arti si diletta; alla poesia era mezzanamente disposto. Scrisse alcuni versi toscani mirabilmente gravi e pieni di sentenze; si piaceva di spesso legger versi amorosi [...]' (1849: 13).

provisare, per alleviamento delle sue molte e poderose occupationi' (Florence, Archivio di Stato [ASFi], Carte Gianni, Cod. 43, 10v-11r). Moreover, he also took part in a tenson on Love and Fortune proposed by Lorenzo⁸¹. Like Poliziano, furthermore, he was of a similar age to Giuliano⁸² and associated with the Medici 'court', and so was likely to have had at least some contact with the younger of the brothers. Proof of this is provided by his two sonnets on Simonetta, both of which were originally addressed to Giuliano, 'Sparito, occhi miei lassi, è l'nostro sole' being entitled 'Per la morte de la Simonetta in persona de Giuliano de Medici', and 'Se morto vive anchor colui ch' in vita' 'Al M. ° Giuliano de Medici: consolatione per la morte de Simonetta' (Percopo 1897: 6). There are no direct references to Giuliano in the poems themselves. However, Benivieni's presentation of him in 'Sparito, occhi miei lassi, è l'nostro sole' as being aware of the limitations of his earthly form but hopeful of being reunited with Simonetta in heaven implies that he is wise beyond his years. Moreover, 'Se morto vive anchor colui ch'in vita' not only presents Simonetta as having 'in grembo al suo fattore salita' (5), but implies that Giuliano too will reach paradise, where he will see her again (7- 14). Once more, the idealised Simonetta's excellence implies that Giuliano is also exceptional, and a fitting counterpart to her.

Not all of the poems are designed to flatter the Medici, however. For example, 'Quanto studio poté natura , et arte' contains no reference to them in either its title ('Simonetta moriente flebile carmen in mortem'⁸³) or its text. Its depiction of Simonetta, so beautiful and virtuous that 'poi che ta[l] nata era,/ dovea per certo non poter morire' (13- 14), is certainly very

⁸¹ For more information on the tenson, to which Poliziano and Pandolfo Collenuccio also contributed, and for a transcription of the poems themselves, see Percopo 1897.

⁸² Both were born, like Simonetta, in 1453, making them 23 at the time of her death.

⁸³ 'Poem on the lamentable death of Simonetta'.

complimentary, but we cannot be sure for whose benefit she is thus portrayed. Luigi Pulci's 'Com'hai tu, crudel Morte, un si bel viso', on the other hand, contains no such ambiguities, being addressed not to Giuliano but to Alfonso d'Aragona, Duke of Calabria and eldest son of Ferrante I, then king of Naples ('Mortem Symonettae Cathaniae Pro Duce Calab[rie] Aloy[sius] Pulc[her]'⁸⁴). This is not as surprising as it might at first appear. Firstly, there is evidence for some kind of connection between Simonetta and Alfonso, who, as the representative of Naples, then allied to Florence, fought with the city against the combined forces of Ferrara and Venice in 1467-1468, and remained in Florence until August 1468, following three months of peace (Bryce 2002: 12- 13). He was therefore in the city around the time of her marriage. Furthermore, Luigi's sonnet is not the only poem to link Simonetta and Alfonso. Francesco Nursio Timideo, a Veronese poet, composed a lengthy funeral elegy on her death, entitled 'Francisci Nursii Timidei Veronensis Regii Secretarii Carmen austerum in funere Symonette Vespucciae Florentinae: Ad illuxtrissimum Alphonsum Calabrie Ducem' (Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze [BNCF], MS II II 75, 192v-202r)⁸⁵. Moreover, Tommaso Sardi's commentary on his Dantesque religious epic, *De Anima Peregrina* (c. 1493- 1515), explains how Alfonso met Simonetta in Florence and fell in love with her. He then goes on to explain, rather cryptically, how, Simonetta's house being next to the Arno, 'una sera sendo caldo entrorno rinfrescarsi nell'acqua el duca et lei: Qui si dice che la fe barchetta- moralizza tu, lectore'⁸⁶. Although the precise meaning is unclear, the moralising tone implies the relationship between the two was of a sexual nature. Whether or not this is true, it is certain that Luigi knew Alfonso. He dedicated his *Novella* to Ippolita Sforza, the

⁸⁴ 'On the death of Simonetta Cattaneo for the Duke of Calabria, from Luigi Pulci'.

⁸⁵ 'A bitter poem on the death of Simonetta Vespucci of Florence by Francesco Nursio Timideo, royal secretary: to the illustrious Alfonso, Duke of Calabria'.

⁸⁶ The original, and only, copy of both Sardi's commentary and poem is found in Florence, Archivio di Santa Maria Novella (SMN), IB 59. The section on Simonetta is from 29r-30r. A partial transcription can be found in Farina 2001: 56-58. For further details on the poem see Nardello 2002.

Duke's wife (Carrai 1985: 56- 57), a number of his letters to Lorenzo in May 1468 state that he was in personal contact with him (Pulci 1868: 31- 35), whilst a letter of August 1468 complains of the Duke's departure (*Ibid.*, 36- 37), and another of December 1470 informs Lorenzo of his [i.e. Luigi's] progress towards Naples on a diplomatic mission, where he was to be in contact with 'la Maestà del Re e con lo illustrissimo Signore Duca' (*Ibid.*, 38- 42). Given that Simonetta's death and the initial poetic response to it coincided with Luigi's increasing marginalisation in Laurentian circles, the fact that his sonnet, with its flattering depiction of Simonetta's beauty and heavenly nature (1-4), should be addressed to the Duke reflects this change in circumstance. It may even have been an attempt to secure a new and powerful patron for his poetic works. It is certainly a provocative move from a poet once so close to the Medici, stressing his increasing distance from the family and singling him out from the other Florentine poets writing vernacular verse on Simonetta. His association of Simonetta with another man, moreover, implies that Giuliano may have been a 'cuckold'.

We can therefore say that, although there are notable exceptions that prove that depictions of Simonetta do not have to be by or for the Medici, and can even be assertions of independence from them, the majority of the poems written on her in the vernacular c. 1476 by Florentine poets mirror Poliziano's complimentary depiction of Lorenzo, Giuliano and their family in the *Stanze*, and were composed specifically for them. Much like Poliziano, they are effectively taking on the role of 'court poets', lending an air of legitimacy to the Medici's control over the city, and further associating them with the 'renewal' of Florentine culture that was taking place. By writing about Simonetta, moreover, they prove that they belong (or aspire to belong) to Medici literary circles. In addition, it demonstrates their elevated social status since, as Martines points out, love poetry

was an upper class pursuit (2001: 96- 98). On the other hand, the fact that Luigi Pulci uses his poem on Simonetta to illustrate his increasing distance from the family, and perhaps even to mock them, shows that the tensions inherent to being a poet in late-fifteenth century Florence are visible even here.

The ‘flourishing’ of Florence?

The flourishing atmosphere of the *Stanze* does not appear to have been a great influence on the ‘minor’ poets writing about Simonetta. On the other hand, some floral imagery can be found in Bernardo Pulci’s ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive’, in which the dead Simonetta, not so dissimilarly from Poliziano’s Simonetta, is described as being dressed in white, ‘come fra l’erba alcun tal volta è avinto’ (40. 2), and as resembling a ‘fior quando dal sole è vinto,/ che per troppo valor bassa le foglie,/ di suo virtù non già privato e ’stinto’ (41. 1-3). This imagery of grass and flowers, although in part a poetic cliché, can surely not have been uninfluenced by the *Stanze*. There is also the fact that Bernardo implicitly compares Simonetta to Daphne (17. 3), who was transformed into a laurel tree. It is as if Bernardo is updating the Spring-like figure of Poliziano’s poem to take account of her death, implying that she is still part of the ‘flourishing’ of culture in death, which has allowed her to take her place beside ‘Laüra bella e Beatrice’ (60. 1), rendered eternal in both heaven and in poetry. In addition, Bernardo’s depiction of Simonetta mirrors that of Albiera degli Albizzi, in Poliziano’s ‘In Albieram Albitiam, Puellam Formosissimam, Morientem. Ad Sismundum Stupham Eius Sponsum’⁸⁷, in which she is compared to freshly

⁸⁷ ‘On the death of Albiera degli Albizzi, a beautiful girl. To Sigismondo della Stufa, her husband’.

plucked lilies or a crown of white roses. Given that Bernardo was also among the poets who mourned Albiera's death⁸⁸, it would be fair to assume that he was aware of Poliziano's elegy and of this comparison⁸⁹. In writing an elegy in the vernacular, and using such similar imagery, he is 'updating' Poliziano's 1473 Latin elegy for the Florence of 1476, and the continuing 'revival' of the vernacular. Moreover, its imitation of the 'Triumphus Mortis' echoes the triumphal structure of the *Stanze*. This may partly be the fruit of Florentine poetic convention. However, along with the poem's combination of classical and vernacular literature, and its open reference to Beatrice and Laura, this suggests that he is celebrating Simonetta as the new, great Tuscan female icon of the Laurentian era. Furthermore, the fact that Bernardo pays homage to Lorenzo's poetic abilities, by imitating his Sonnet I in stanza 64 of 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive', connects the ruler both to Simonetta and to the 'renewal' of the *volgare* that she represents.

There are fewer links between the 'flourishing aspects' of the *Stanze* and the other poems discussed in this chapter. Although Bernardo's 'Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra', and Luigi's 'Com'hai tu, crudel Morte, un sì bel viso' both imitate various aspects of the 'Triumphus Mortis', they contain none of the flower imagery of the *Stanze* and 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive'. Benivieni's poems and 'Quanto studio poté natura, et arte' contain no prominent references to the *Trionfi*. All five poems have more in common with the *Stanze*'s complaints against *Fortuna* (*Stanze*. II. 35- 37) than with the rest of the work. We can surmise, perhaps, that these poets were

⁸⁸ He wrote a sonnet for her, 'Furato ài, Morte dispietata et rea' (c. 1473) (transcribed by Zannoni 1893: 12).

⁸⁹ There are intertextual links between several of the 'Simonetta poems' studied in this thesis. For example, both Luigi (5) and Bernardo ('Venite...', 57, 2) state that heaven is revelling in the Earth's loss. In addition, several 'foreigners' (Michele Marullo, Alessandro Cortese, Francesco Nursio Timideo and Tommaso Baldinotti) also wrote about her. Both facts suggest that poems on Simonetta were circulated in intellectual circles. There is no reason to assume that the same was not true of the 'Albiera poems'.

themselves flourishing less well in Medicean Florence, in both material and literary terms, than Poliziano and Bernardo.

Simonetta as a patriotic figure?

Chapter Two argued that Lorenzo's presentation of Simonetta in his *Comento* transformed her into a civic symbol, through its ostentatiously Florentine approach to imitation, and its aim of ennobling the Tuscan language. It is obvious that, lacking the prose commentary that plays such an important role in the *Comento*, most particularly in its 'Proemio', poems on Simonetta by 'minor' Florentine authors cannot promote and celebrate Florence's cultural heritage as explicitly as Lorenzo. However, they do have some connections to the 'patriotic' aspects of Lorenzo's portrayal of Simonetta. For example, Bernardo Pulci's 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive' uses the term 'patria' in its final line (64. 4), in its invocation to Simonetta, as a star, to shine down on Florence. Moreover, Bernardo's use of imitation, if similar in content to Poliziano's, is more akin to Lorenzo's in style. References to both vernacular literature and the classical world are very pointed in the poem. For example, Bernardo draws openly on Greek mythology when stating that 'Febo non pianse la sua donna morta/ [...] né le sorelle sue pianson Fetonte,/ quanto merito ancor lice e conviensi/ a noi bagnar di lacrime la fronte' (52- 53). Moreover, his assertion that Laura and Beatrice make way for Simonetta 'nelli eterni chiostri' (60. 1-2) leaves no doubt as to his vernacular influences, and clearly celebrates Florence's cultural heritage.

In addition, Bernardo portrays the mourning of Simonetta as a communal activity, prefiguring similar observations in the prose sections of Lorenzo's *Comento*⁹⁰. Indeed, Lorenzo appears to have been familiar with the elegy, due to the similarities of some the ideas presented here to those in the prose sections of his *Comento*. For instance, Bernardo claims that she was praised by other beautiful women, who admitted her superiority without envy (8. 2-3), which chimes with Lorenzo's observation that both men and women loved her and exalted her charms, 'sanza gelosia' and 'sanza invidia' (*Comento*, 592). Lorenzo, in Pisa at the time of Simonetta's death⁹¹, also appears to have worked with Bernardo's description of her as 'in sul feretro posta assai più bella' (55. 3) in his depiction of her funeral, in which he makes a strikingly similar assertion (*Comento*, 592)⁹². Lorenzo's depiction of the crowds who flock to her funeral and the literary response to her death (*Comento*, 592- 593) also has something of Bernardo's reference to the pomp and circumstance with which she is mourned by 'tanti incliti viri' (43. 3). Furthermore, Bernardo too uses the first person plural throughout his elegy, for example, 'Diceva lasso ognun: "Chi ci contende/ le delicate sue membra pudiche [...]"' (45. 1-2). He is evidently, not unlike Lorenzo but within the limits of verse, appealing to a sense of communal pride and identity in his depiction of Simonetta's death. The poem may be addressed to Giuliano, but in the love and grief that she is depicted as inspiring she affects the city as a whole.

⁹⁰ As was pointed out in Chapter Two, Lorenzo's sonnets were written c. 1476, but the commentary on them dates from no earlier than 1480, meaning that it is entirely possible that Bernardo was influenced by Lorenzo's sonnets, and was in his turn an inspiration for the prose sections of the *Comento*.

⁹¹ Piero Vespucci's letters to Lorenzo during the course of Simonetta's illness attest to his presence in Pisa (see Neri 1885: 136- 137).

⁹² It should be noted that Lorenzo's depiction of Simonetta's funeral, and his overt use of the 'Triumphus Mortis', I, 172, were also inspired by a letter from his agent, Sforza Bettini, informing him of her death: 'La benedetta anima della Simonetta se ne andò a paradiso, come so harette inteso: puossi ben dire che sia stato il secondo Trionpho della morte, che veramente havendola voi vista così morte come la era, non vi saria parsa manco bella e vezzosa che si fusse in vita: *requiescat in pace*' (transcribed in Neri 1885: 137).

The communal aspects of ‘Quanto studio poté natura, et arte’ may also have had an influence upon the *Comento*. Not only does the poem emphasise the amount of tears shed over Simonetta (5), but it also lays particular stress on the poetic outpouring that she inspired:

[...]

quanti poi d’Elicone derivar fiumi,

quante penne stracharsi inchiostri et carte.

(7- 8)

Lorenzo too, as we saw in Chapter Two, underlines the fact that many were inspired to mourn her death and celebrate her life in verse and prose, adding an extra layer of patriotic sentiment in his insistence that those who wrote about her were Florentine (*Comento*, 593)⁹³. Even if the poem’s use of imitation bears a closer resemblance to that of Poliziano, then, there are clearly links to Lorenzo’s patriotic take on Simonetta, and to the promotion of Florence’s vernacular by the city’s intelligentsia as a whole.

Several more of the poems on Simonetta can be connected to the Florentine campaign to exalt the *volgare*, via their obvious use of Tuscan vernacular source material. For example, as we have seen, Bernardo’s ‘Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra’ is entirely based on Petrarchan literary conventions, and the sonnets of Luigi Pulci and Girolamo Benivieni are almost as replete with references to poetry in the *volgare*. As with the *Comento*, there is no doubt as to the literary tradition that the poets are celebrating. Moreover, the fact that so many of the poets writing about

⁹³ Even if, as we have seen (n. 106), this does not always hold true.

Simonetta chose to compose their works in the vernacular is a statement of belief in the language's ability to express 'cose subtili e gravi e necessarie alla vita umana', as Lorenzo puts it in his 'Proemio' (*Comento*, 579). Only three years previously, none of the forty texts that Sigismondo della Stufa included in an anthology of the works inspired by the death in 1473 of his betrothed, Albiera degli Albizzi, were written in the vernacular. They number six elegies, three letters, one hymn, twenty-eight epigrams in Latin, and two Greek epigrams, but not a single sonnet (See Patetta 1917- 1918 for further details). The vernacular was evidently not considered a suitable medium for such statements of grief and solidarity. Indeed, the one poem on Albiera composed in the *volgare*⁹⁴ is excluded from the collection, providing further proof of the language's still comparatively lowly status. In contrast, of the twenty-three poems that I have so far discovered that were written c. 1476, in the aftermath of Simonetta's death, eleven were composed in the vernacular, taking into account the six poems discussed in this chapter, Lorenzo's four sonnets, and Francesco Nursio Timideo's elegy. The mere fact that the poets discussed in this chapter composed their works on Simonetta in the *volgare* is therefore a combined proclamation of pride in their native language, and a sign of its increasing importance in Laurentian Florence. In this sense, Simonetta is a patriotic figure in all of the poems discussed in this chapter.

⁹⁴ By Bernardo Pulci; see n. 105.

Simonetta as a political creation?

It is obvious that the poems discussed in this chapter cannot be ‘political’ in the same manner as Lorenzo’s *Comento*, in which the ruler presents himself as one, good citizen among many, the spokesperson for Florence’s collective grief, and as a philosopher-king. The ‘minor’ poets had no such need to justify their control over a city. On the other hand, their work is not without political aspects. For example, their poems may well have had an effect upon Florence’s internal affairs. As Martelli points out, when Lorenzo came to power interest in the classical world was associated with the Medici and their supporters⁹⁵, whilst the vernacular was viewed as the domain of Florence’s traditional ruling élite, who were opposed to the family’s dominance over the city (1992: 40). This left the Medici vulnerable to accusations of not being sufficiently ‘Florentine’ in their cultural tastes, in contrast to Florence’s oligarchy, who could present themselves as venerating the city’s great *Trecento* traditions of poetry and republicanism. The fact that Lorenzo was openly promoting the *volgare* in works such as the *Comento*, composing his entire poetic output in the language (Kent 2004: 41), emphasising the connections between Florence’s literary heritage and that of ancient Rome, and sponsoring and attracting vernacular works from a range of Florentine poets underlined his claim to be the language’s champion. As Panizza puts it, ‘Medici patronage of the vernacular [...] was a means of disarming anti-Medici factions and promoting a sense of Florentine identity’ (2004: 145). The ‘minor’ poets’ use of

⁹⁵ As Panizza (2004: 145) details: ‘Cosimo [Lorenzo’s grandfather, who began to gain control over Florence in 1434, and died in 1464] energetically promoted Greek and Latin studies, especially translations of classical authors: his success in bringing to Florence the famous Council of Greek and Latin Churches, held in 1439, brought [...] Greek scholars and precious Greek texts. His initiative in commissioning Marsilio Ficino to make the first complete translation of Plato into Latin was enormously important in diffusing a new Platonic culture [...] Cosimo also brought the Greek Giovanni Argyropoulos to lecture at the Florentine *studium* [...] on Aristotle and his Greek commentators, and to translate Aristotle anew’.

Simonetta to celebrate the *volgare*, and to appeal to their readers' patriotic pride and feelings of *fiorentinità*, illustrates this point.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Lorenzo's *Comento* was designed to drive home political messages not only in Florence but also 'abroad', particularly in Naples. Luigi Pulci's poem on Simonetta, however controversial, can be read as playing a role in this complicated story of cultural diplomacy. Firstly, it was presumably written in 1476, only a year before the *Raccolta Aragonese* was assembled, coinciding with various landmarks in Florence-Naples relations (Bryce 2002: 21- 22). Secondly, as we have discussed, Luigi addressed the poem to Alfonso d'Aragona, whom he knew personally from their time together in Pisa, and from his ambassadorial mission to Naples in 1471. According to Orvieto, moreover, Luigi was increasingly taking on the diplomatic role of emissary and informer (1978: 239), having fallen out of Lorenzo's favour as poet and friend. In addition, Luigi was a close friend of Piero Vespucci, Simonetta's father-in-law, which not only gave him a personal connection to Simonetta herself⁹⁶ but also another to Naples, since Piero had been appointed Florence's ambassador to the Aragonese court in 1470⁹⁷. On the other hand, Luigi's poem could equally be viewed as a provocation, intended to stir up rivalry between Giuliano and Alfonso at a time when relations between Florence and Naples were already on a downward spiral (Bryce 2002: 20). The 'minor Simonetta poems', then, with the possible exception of Luigi's 'Com'hai, crudel Morte,

⁹⁶ Evidence that Luigi associated with Simonetta is provided by a letter from Luigi to Lorenzo, dated 21 March 1473, in which Luigi relays the news of a mass poisoning at the court of Piombino, responsible for the deaths of her half-sister and brother-in-law: 'Hoggi in casa messer Piero ho inteso da chi viene di là, come sono stati avelenati, et da chi et come, et chi non è morto morrà. Et più che la Simonetta dice, è più settimane gli fu detto la sua sorella era morto di questo, et come tutti morrebbono senza manco, chè haveano beuto' (*Lettere di Luigi Pulci a Lorenzo il Magnifico e ad altri*. Ed. S. Bongi. Lucca, Tipografia Giusti, 89). This appears to be the only instance in which Simonetta's own words are recorded.

⁹⁷ Farina 2001: 31- 33 provides more details on Piero's successful sojourn in Naples. It is not entirely clear how long he remained in the city, but is known that he was *podestà* of Milan in 1474, and spent some time in Florence between the two missions.

un sì bel viso', aided Lorenzo's political and cultural schemes, even if their role in them is not as obvious as that of the *Comento*.

Simonetta as iconic?

We have seen how the *Comento* transforms Simonetta into an abstracted, angelic and star-like figure, a beacon of hope for 1480s Florence. It is self-evident that poems written on Simonetta in the mid- 1470s, prior to the Pazzi Conspiracy and ensuing war, cannot reflect events that had not yet taken place. At the same time, they are not entirely devoid of the iconic aspects present in Lorenzo's presentation of Simonetta in his sonnets. In 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive', for example, by imitating Lorenzo's portrayal of her as a star shining over the city (64. 2-4), by depicting her as taking her place besides Laura and Beatrice in heaven (60), and by picturing her throughout as both virtuous Tuscan beauty and classical goddess, Bernardo makes her symbolic of the revival of Florence's *volgare* under the Medici. She is the new shining ideal of Florentine poetic womanhood, and is alive and justly honoured in heaven (55- 58). She is in this sense a hopeful figure, celebrating Florence's achievements under the Medici, and illuminating the way for those yet to come. The significance of Simonetta in Bernardo's poetry is shown by the fact that, whilst Bernardo composed a number of sonnets *in mortem*, he wrote only one other funereal elegy, commemorating the death of Cosimo in 1464⁹⁸. In 'Bernardo Pulci per la morte di Cosimo de' Medici a Lorenzo', Cosimo is portrayed as the saviour of his homeland (29. 1-3), is compared to any number of Greek and Roman statesmen, such as Pericles (2. 1) and Brutus (3. 2-3), and is

⁹⁸ According to Lanza's anthology of Bernardo's poems in his 1975 *Lirici toscani del Quattrocento*, Vol. II. It is notable, too, that of the sonnets only one (that on Albiera) is dedicated to a woman.

found to be superior even to Caesar and Cato (41. 1-3). He therefore becomes symbolic of the Medici's wise and virtuous rule, which has created a city 'd'ogn'arte clara e disciplina intègra' (57. 3). Like Simonetta, he has ascended to heaven (51. 2). However, unlike her, he is welcomed not by the two great figures of Tuscan poetry but by a crowd of noble classical statesmen (52-55). Bernardo is thus portraying him as Florence's political icon in death, symbolic of magnanimous, 'republican' and Medicean rule- the assertive male figure of political and civic action. His elegy on Simonetta, also addressed to the Medici brothers, parallels this interpretation of Cosimo. Compared to Laura and to classical deities, Simonetta becomes the passive female representative of Florence's cultural 'renewal', the fruit of the Medici family's wise leadership. In Bernardo's poetry, they are therefore the twin icons of Laurentian Florence.

Although none of the other 'minor' poems on Simonetta endow her with such symbolic meaning, it is interesting to note that she is portrayed as a star who could compete with the Sun in Luigi Pulci's 'Com'hai tu, crudel Morte, un sì bel viso' (11- 12). This corresponds closely to Lorenzo's assertion that Simonetta's star is as bright as Apollo (1- 3). For Luigi too, then, she is a beacon of light, through whom paradise could be contemplated (4), and who is not dimmed by death. For Bernardo Pulci in his 'Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra', she is not a star but is certainly in heaven (10), looking down on Giuliano and attempting to comfort him. Similarly, in Benivieni's sonnets she is depicted as being 'in cielo' ('Se morto vive anchor colui ch'in vita'. 13; 'Sparito, occhi miei lassi, è l'nostro sole'. 14), although in the latter poem her light is extinguished in death (1-2). The only work to depart from this insistence on Simonetta's beatification is 'Quanto studio poté natura, et arte', which depicts her as crossing the Styx, one of the rivers of the classical underworld, in a poem whose conception of death appears to be entirely

negative. Simonetta simply should not have died (14), and there is nothing that can redeem the fact that she has done so. On the other hand, in all of these poems, and indeed in all of those written after her death, her absence allows her to become an ideal of abstracted beauty, grace and virtue, whose eyes frequently allow contemplation of the divine⁹⁹. In this sense, she is in one way or another iconic throughout the works of the ‘minor’ poets, even if not in the complex political and Ficinian manner of Lorenzo’s *Comento*.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of the works of the ‘minor’ Florentine poets who were writing about Simonetta in the mid-1470s we can conclude that there is no one, schematic way of representing her. This means that a good deal more research still needs to be done on literary depictions of Simonetta and the relationships between the poets who composed them, to gain a fuller picture of the cultural and political context of the day. The poems contain aspects that are similar both to Poliziano’s portrayal of her in the *Stanze*, and to Lorenzo’s in the *Comento*. Bernardo Pulci’s ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive’ is particularly attuned to the times, drawing on Poliziano’s representation of Simonetta as a classical goddess and Laura-like figure, and combining it with Lorenzo’s portrayal of her as a star, in order to transform her into a symbol of the ‘renewal’ of the vernacular in Laurentian Florence. None of the poems, however, are entirely based on the *Stanze*, or provide the model for the *Comento*, having nothing particularly Ficinian about them. As poems written to commemorate Simonetta’s death, they could hardly predict the

⁹⁹ See ‘Quanto studio poté natura, et arte’. 6; the entirety of Lorenzo’s Sonnet I; ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive. 48. 1-3; and ‘Com’hai tu, crudel Morte, un sì bel viso’. 3-4.

changes that were to take place by the 1480s, and rarely associate her with floral imagery. Moreover, the majority of the poems are heavily based on Petrarchan conventions of form and language, working with *Trecento* and Medieval concepts of womanhood and rejecting the ideal of femininity being created by Poliziano and Lorenzo, hinting at any number of tensions between the poets. Luigi Pulci is even openly provocative, addressing his poem to Alfonso d' Aragona rather than to Giuliano. The 'Simonetta poems' are clearly more illustrative of discord and rivalry than of any kind of consensus as to how she should be portrayed. On the other hand, in using the vernacular to write poems *in mortem*, which had previously not been widely acceptable, all of the works are contributing to the revival in literature in the *volgare* promoted in Laurentian Florence. By taking on the role of 'court poets', moreover, and so frequently addressing their elegies and sonnets to Giuliano, they not only associate the Medici with vernacular verse, but contribute to the increasingly princely status of the family.

CONCLUSION

In the Introduction to this thesis I outlined my plans to study Florentine representations of Simonetta in the *volgare* in the light of the cultural and political changes that were taking place in the city during the 1470s and 1480s. From the results of this enquiry it is clear that she can tell us a great deal about how poets adapted to the new, classical and vernacular, sense of *fiorentinità*, about the effects of Medici rule on them, and about how they responded to the growth in ‘patriotic’ sentiment, encouraged by Lorenzo, towards Florence’s literary heritage.

In the *Stanze*, in which stilnovistic and Petrarchan lyric poetry is blended with the conventions of third- person classical and vernacular narrative poetry, Simonetta is the means by which a new ideal of femininity is constructed. Thanks to Poliziano’s subtle use of imitation she becomes an intricate interweaving of echoes of ancient and vernacular texts, an updating of Laura that takes into account the late fifteenth-century insistence upon Florence’s classical roots, and transforms her into a figure with both the virtue and beauty of Petrarch’s beloved, and the divine qualities of a nymph. Simonetta is therefore ‘modern’ in her combination of these source materials but also timeless, the essence of ‘Florentine’ poetic womanhood as understood in an era that was convinced of the connection between ancient Rome and *Quattrocento* Florence. Poliziano’s Simonetta is also illustrative of the increasingly ‘princely’ nature of the Medici’s control over Florence, via Lorenzo’s client networks. It was a competitive world, in which poets needed to ingratiate themselves with their patrons, as Poliziano flatters Lorenzo, Giuliano and Simonetta herself. Moreover, not only does the poet depict the brothers as the heroic knights of an idealised Tuscan world, bringing peace and prosperity to Florence, beloved both by their peers and by the gods themselves, but he helps to make this courtly fantasy a reality by effectively

taking on the role of ‘court poet’. Simonetta, connected to flowers, beauty and Spring, becomes the female embodiment of this flourishing Florentine landscape, celebrating the ‘renewal’ of the city under Lorenzo. Even the death of the real-life Simonetta is woven into the poem’s triumphal structure.

In Lorenzo’s *Comento*, which builds on her portrayal in the *Stanze*, she becomes a more explicitly patriotic, ‘Florentine’ figure via Lorenzo’s ostentatious imitation of Dante and Petrarch, classical mythology and Platonic philosophy. Furthermore, she is of great political utility to Lorenzo, allowing the ruler to imply his respect for, and importance to, Florence, presenting himself as the defender and promoter of its cultural heritage. In describing Simonetta’s funeral he becomes the humble spokesperson for the city’s grief, one voice among the many who lamented her, rather than ruler and patron. In addition, his uses her to present himself as a philosopher-ruler, led to wisdom by her star, and as such worthy of his dominant position in Florentine society. The fact that Simonetta was linked to Naples through her brother-in-law and father-in-law, not to mention by Alfonso d’Aragona’s supposed attachment to her, also made her a useful tool in Lorenzo’s policy of cultural diplomacy towards the southern city. Moreover, connected to both Giuliano and Naples, and so to the triumphs and tragedies of late- 1470s and early- 1480s Florence, Simonetta is the perfect vehicle to express a city ‘reborn’ thanks to Lorenzo’s wise guidance. A shining star that must die to allow this ‘rebirth’ to take place, she symbolises Florence’s cultural successes under the Medici, the dark days of 1478 and 1479, beset by murder, execution and war, but also the hope of the 1480s. She is an emblem of Florentine identity under which the city can reunite, its journey from darkness to light synonymous with Lorenzo’s discovery of a *vita nuova* of ideal love.

The ‘minor’ poets who write about Simonetta display no consensus as to how she should be represented, and in fact use their works to assert their differences. Bernardo Pulci’s ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive’, and the anonymous ‘Quanto studio poté natura, et arte’ work with a composite ideal of femininity that mirrors the *Stanze* and the *Comento*, but the majority of the poems, including Bernardo’s sonnet, are the creations of traditional concepts of Florentine poetry and Christian piety, and express their authors’ indifference or opposition to this new paradigm. Even Girolamo Benivieni, whom one might expect to refer to classical and Platonic ideas in his portrayal of Simonetta, opts instead for pious consolation and Petrarchan language. Moreover, Luigi Pulci’s decision to address his poem to Alfonso d’Aragona appears to be openly provocative. The fact that this brief and partial study of poetic depictions of Simonetta reveals so many tensions demonstrates the need for further research on the topic. For example, what was the nature of the relationships between the different poets? If so few of them refer to Platonic ideas, how significant were Ficino’s theories to the verse of the era?

On the other hand, the fact most of the works, with the glaring exception of Luigi’s sonnet, are addressed to Giuliano demonstrates the importance of Medici patronage to them. Although, with the exception of Bernardo’s elegy and, naturally, ‘Com’hai tu, crudel Morte, un sì bel viso’, the poems are not openly flattering of Lorenzo and Giuliano, their praise of Simonetta makes them indirectly so. Moreover, as with Poliziano, these writers take on the role of ‘court poets’, lauding her life and death. Of the six poems considered here only ‘Venite, sacre e gloriose dive’ manages to adapt Poliziano’s flourishing, floral Simonetta to take her death into account, not a surprising statistic for poems written *in mortem*. Then again, although Bernardo’s elegy is unique in its openly ‘patriotic’ themes, all of the poems can be said to be ‘patriotic’ in the faith

that they display in the *volgare*'s ability to convey the 'la gravità [...] l'onestà, la dignità, la maestà, la magnificenza' and 'la grandezza' (Bembo 1989: 146) necessary for commemorative verse. They also increase the connection between the Medici and the *volgare*, enhancing their reputation as champions of Florentine culture. Moreover, in Bernardo's 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive', Simonetta is overtly equated with Laura and Beatrice, a star-like figure who celebrates Florence's cultural achievements under Laurentian rule, and is frequently associated with light and stars in the other works.

We can therefore read Simonetta, as portrayed in these Florentine vernacular texts of the 1470s and 1480s, as a figure of transition who enabled poets to express the cultural and political developments that were taking place in the city in different ways. In the *Stanze*, the *Comento*, 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive' and 'Quanto studio poté natura, et arte' she becomes the embodiment of a new ideal of femininity in line with theories that saw Florence's poetic heritage as being at once classical and vernacular. On the other hand, Girolamo Benivieni presents her in a manner that owes relatively little to ancient sources, while Bernardo Pulci returns to Petrarchan language and forms in 'Se viva e morta io ti dovea far guerra', and Luigi Pulci had no interest in working with the new style of poetry. There was evidently a great deal of resistance to the changes being brought in, even from poets whom one might have expected to be in favour of them.

Simonetta is also evidence of Florence's shift from republic to principedom in all but name, which would eventually see the Medici become Dukes of Florence in 1532, and Grand Dukes of Tuscany in 1569. She is a Laura or Beatrice figure, as made explicit by Bernardo Pulci in 'Venite, sacre e gloriose dive', but she is no longer the romantic and intellectual property of one

poet alone, as were the idealised, dead Tuscan beauties beloved of Petrarch and Dante. Rather, in the context of the nascent Medici ‘court’, even if sincerely mourned and praised by a number of different poets, she becomes a useful tool for ingratiation and competition, employed to provide evidence of the poets’ dedication to Lorenzo and Giuliano, and of their poetic accomplishments. Moreover, for Lorenzo she is the perfect vehicle to express his respect for, and protection of, both Florence’s citizens and its literary heritage, a message underlined by the fact that so many of the poets associated with Laurentian circles also wrote verse on her in the *volgare*. Furthermore, the fact that Simonetta, alive and dead, played such a significant role in relations between Florence and Naples suggests the increasing importance to the Medici of women as objects of exchange, used in life and death to further their diplomatic and dynastic aims. On the other hand, the fact that Luigi Pulci uses Simonetta to express his discomfort with the cultural changes taking place in Florence, and to provoke his former patrons and their Neapolitan allies, suggest the obstacles and conflicts that were to accompany the Medici’s path to absolute, sanctioned power.

In this MPhil thesis I have been able to establish that Simonetta and her untimely death acts as pretext for a number of influential Florentine figures to express their similarities and differences of opinions on the political, philosophical and aesthetic questions of the day. The exact nature of these interconnections and their place in a broader network of voices praising Simonetta and lamenting her death requires more attention than the constraints of an MPhil can afford. In my PhD, therefore, I shall follow the Simonetta thread to enquire further into the friendships and tensions that may have existed between the poets introduced in this thesis. In doing so, I hope to offer an important intervention in the debate about the existence of non-existence of a ‘Florentine Academy’ and intellectual atmosphere therein. I shall also broaden the

scope of this present study to include other representations of Simonetta in both the vernacular and in Latin, from the *Stanze*, begun in 1475, to Tommaso Sardi's commentary on his *De Anima Peregrina*, completed in 1515. At the same time, I shall introduce the visual arts angle, so crucial to most twentieth-century discussions of Simonetta. Working on a solid bedrock of literary analysis, I shall summarise current thinking on the presence or absence of Simonetta in paintings by Botticelli, Piero di Cosimo and others, and offer my own assessment of the debate, examining, on the basis of the evidence, what it implies about the dialogue between artists and poets in Laurentian Florence.

In doing this, I hope to shed light on the processes that led to Simonetta's mythologisation, on her significance in *Quattrocento* Florence, and on what this tells us about contemporary attitudes to women in the city and beyond.

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