## Dunant's *The Birth of Venus*by way of Niccolo Machiavelli

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The name Machiavelli is synonymous with acquiring power, maintaining control, and taking on an appearance contrary to one's actions, all issues prevalent in Alessandra's journey of personal empowerment. Machiavelli's notorious work, The Prince, itself a product of the Florentine Renaissance, was written as a gift to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici, intended to be a guide for action or handbook if you will. Comprised of what Machiavelli considers truths extracted from history, reflecting "what men do, and not what they ought to do," it falls within the genre of speculum principis or "mirror for princes". However, given that *The Prince* is more a study of human nature than merely the machinations of a political system, its practicality is not limited to princes.<sup>3</sup> Allusion to Machiavelli is made early in the work with Alessandra's statement that, "Like a bad republic, our house praises virtue publicly but rewards vice privately"4 and continues throughout the novel. Employing Machiavellian principles in my examination of *The* Birth of Venus not only allows us to chart Alessandra's progress toward self-realization but also, these concepts also reflect historic events that shape Renaissance Florence, those which inform the symbol that Alessandra ultimately becomes.

In the following analysis I will examine each of the three locations that Alessandra occupies over the course of the novel and by extension, the forces at work in Renaissance Florence. I will identify the Machiavellian principle applicable to the story line, consider the historic events reflected by that principle and examine the allegory that exists between the two. Lastly, I will unpack the novel's terminal symbol,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning(1605)*. trans. David Price, <a href="http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/">http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/</a> adlr10h.htm (accessed 14 September, 2012), bk. II, xxi, 9. <a href="mailto:2Machiavelli">2Machiavelli</a>, Niccolo. *The Prince*. trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn. (New York: Barnes & Noble

Classics, 2004), xxii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Machiavelli, 2004, xxii-xxxvii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Sarah Dunant, *The Birth of Venus* (New York: Random House, 2004), 12.

which is founded on these layers. I begin at Alessandra's father's house where she is neither physically nor emotionally ready to live the life expected of her. This setting functions as a staging ground for events to follow, establishing the climate from which future events develop, Florence's base line if you will. Logically, I continue with Cristoforo's home, a milieu steeped in issues of power and deception, where Alessandra's newly attained womanhood matures and her daughter is born. Finally, this discussion takes us to Santa Vitella's Convent, where Alessandra has chosen to live out her life and from which her daughter Plautilla departs on her own journey. Everything that has transpired up to this point culminates in the aforementioned symbol and Alessandra is now fully that symbol.

On its surface, Alessandra Cecchi's story is clearly a tale of gender inequality and a young woman's struggle for self-realization. The novel's setting of Renaissance Florence establishes a lush backdrop of wealth and grandeur, utilizing iconic works of art and culture such as Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*,<sup>5</sup> The Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore<sup>6</sup> and Dante's *Divine Comedy* <sup>7</sup>. The Humanist underpinnings of Florentine Renaissance however, makes Alessandra's circumstances more than merely inequitable; it takes her situation beyond the purview of mere subjugation into the realm of cruel irony even before taking her Medici blood into consideration.

Humanism is a philosophy characterized by an emphasis on human potential for excellence, inspired by a renewed interest in the classical era which is perceived as a golden age in contrast to the more recent medieval times. Humanist thinkers studied

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Dunant, 184.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Dunant, 50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Dunant, 139.

Greek and Roman culture with an eye toward the Platonic ideal, thereby stimulating an appreciation for beauty that becomes the catalyst for a new golden age known as the Renaissance.<sup>8</sup> Plato's preeminent position within the Florentine Renaissance is acknowledged with Alessandra's declaration that, "If you are to be noticed here in Florence you cannot ignore him".<sup>9</sup>

A return to the ancients also gives prominence to the intellectual freedom and individual expression that had flourished in Greece and Rome but was quelled during the middle ages, thereby bringing about a resurgence in individualism. This translates into the notion that one's identity is not derived from a profession, which in contemporary parlance would be, "you are more than what you do". Nor is identity (as opposed to one's name) something inherited. A man's identity is nothing less than the progeny of his own works and deeds, or as Erasmus put it, "men are not born, but made," as exemplified by Alessandra's father, who is very much the proverbial selfmade man. Having begun his professional life in a draper's shop as did his father before him, he has advanced his career to that of cloth merchant, one that "the Florentine appetite for flamboyant cloth" has made wealthy enough to build his own palazzo. In addition to financial rewards, he garners enough respect to secure a place

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Steven Kreis, "The Medieval Synthesis and the Discovery of Man: The Renaissance," *Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History*, no. 4,

http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture4a.html#humanism (accessed 9 September, 2012).

Jon Cook, "Why Renaissance? Why Florence?," *History Review*, no. 47,

http://www.historytoday.com/jon-cook/why-renaissance-why-florence\_(accessed 9, September, 2012).

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy, 1995 ed., s.v. "Humanism."

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy, 1995 ed., s.v. "Renaissance Philosophy."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Dunant, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli, 2004, xli.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Dunant, 6.

on Florence's Security Council despite the fact that his education "had only been sufficient unto the fact of his trade". 12

However, this does not hold true for those who have the misfortune not to be born male. Alessandra is denied more than her wish to apprentice with a master, as she laments to the painter:

I am stuck in this house while my parents look for a husband for me. Eventually they will buy one with a good name and I will go to his house, run his household, have his children, and disappear into the fabric of his life like a pale thread of color in a tapestry.<sup>13</sup>

The standard for women on such subjects can be articulated with a passage from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*:

For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.<sup>14</sup>

This passage not only demonstrates Alessandra powerless state at this point in her life but, it also indicates that Florence's standard for women is a vestige of the middle ages, a period imbued with the inflexible, unemotional logic of Aristotelian categories, thereby anticipating Savonarola's societal "correction".<sup>15</sup>

Inside the Cecchi home we are introduced to Tomaso and Luca, who will become Machiavelli's Fox and Lion. Machiavelli contends that, "a prince must know well how to use the nature of the beast, he must choose the fox and the lion from among them, for

Dunant. 9. 80-81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Dunant, 81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Dunant, 71-71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, <a href="http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1092.htm">http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1092.htm</a> (accessed 15 September, 2012), Art. 1, Q 92, Reply to Obj. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Correction is termed used in class discussion. Kreis.

the lion cannot defend himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves."16 Personality traits in each of the brothers mark Tomaso and Luca as the fox and the lion respectively. Evidence supporting the Tomaso:Fox and Luca:Lion analogy is seen during family discussions, where we witness these dynamics in action. After being questioned by his mother about a nasty comment he has made to Alessandra under his breath, Tomaso "puts on his most cherubic expression," feigning that his remark had concerned his "dreadful thirst," and asks his "dear sister" to pass the wine. 17 His crafty nature presents itself again in the moments immediately preceding the family's discussion concerning Florence's impending encounter with the French army. Having been summoned to their father's office, it is clear that Tomaso enjoys the fact that he knew about King Charles' arrival before Alessandra and has misled her into thinking the topic of conversation would be the unsavory subject of Florence's recent murders. 18 Although these instances are merely childish annoyances they foreshadow Tomaso's greatest deception, his role in the arrangement of Alessandra's marriage to Cristoforo.

While Tomaso attempts to live by his wits, Luca, is a rather dim fellow as indicated by Alessandra's wish that she had a florin for every time lessons had been delayed "waiting for Luca to arrive at a place I had already left". 19 Luca's inclination to eat with his fingers alludes to his animalistic nature. Later in the work Tomaso informs Alessandra that Luca "gets his pleasure" by "brawling" in the streets. Upon learning

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Machiavelli, 2004, 75.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Dunant, 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Dunant, 81.

Dunant, 9-10, 80-81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Dunant, 228.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Dunant, 212.

that the French army would be passing through Tuscany, Luca's eyes "shown like gold medallions" at the thought engaging them.<sup>21</sup> Despite his father's rebuke that "there is more glory in peace than in war" and that neutrality would be a more prudent display of strength, Luca persists with the notion that the citizens of Florence should fight. <sup>22</sup> As usual, he has "listened but not heard a thing". <sup>23</sup> This observation regarding Luca's character indicates his resistance to thinking things through, a proclivity that makes him receptive to Savonarola's literalism. The combination of this propensity with Luca's penchant for physical confrontation makes him a prime candidate for Savonarola's army.

Circumstances surrounding the French army's arrival in Florence bring us to Machiavelli's contention that one cannot always make safe choices and that (as anyone with a modicum of life experience knows) sometimes the only choice is between a dubious situation and something even worse. As Machiavelli succinctly phrases it, "one never strives to avoid one difficulty without running into another; but prudence consists in knowing how to recognize the difficulties and choosing the least bad one as good". Alessandra's hasty marriage falls into this category. Her father's original plan was for Alessandra, like other Florentine girls, to be sent to a convent. However, we are already aware of how ill-suited Alessandra is for life in a traditional convent and bearing in mind that she is recently "ready" to wed (in addition to the fact that marriage is unavoidable no matter what the circumstances), a husband for her is found.

Alessandra's response to Erila's concerns about the speed with which the marriage was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Dunant, 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Dunant, 82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Dunant, 82.

Dunant, 9-10, 80-82, 228.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Machiavelli, 2004, 96.

arranged underscores the *lesser of two evils* nature of the situation. "Did I miss the queue outside the house? Or would you have preferred to see me fingering my rosary beads in some damp cell in the wilds of the country? I could have asked to take you with me there too."<sup>25</sup> In this passage, Alessandra is reminding Erila that she is not a typical wifely candidate and as such her choice of prospective husbands is limited. Alessandra also makes it clear that she is not inclined toward her only other option, the convent. What we don't hear but already know, is that Cristoforo does not appear to be put off by her lack of traditional feminine abilities such as dancing, and may actually appreciate her intellect. Bearing this in mind marrying Cristoforo, although dubious, appears to be the better choice.

As King Charles's invasion is the impetus for Alessandra's hasty marriage, fear of the French army drives the Florentine citizenry into the proverbial arms of Savonarola, allowing him to become the effective ruler of Florence and fill the power vacuum created by Piero de Medici's exile. This political transition has a decisive effect on Savonarola's prophetic message. Prior to the arrival of King Charles' troops, Savonarola preaches a penitential sermon of Last Days replete with hellfire and brimstone while expressing a hope that Florence is spared divine punishment at the hands of the French. Now that Florence has survived this "tribulation" unscathed, Savonarola speaks of the city as divinely favored with the task of becoming a New

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Dunant, 113.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, "Aggeus, Sermon VII," *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, trans. and ed. by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 139.

Jerusalem, the first city of a New Age. However in order to do so, Florence must "consolidate her formal revolution with an internal, spiritual one".<sup>27</sup>

Savonarola declares simplicity to be the key to this virtuous revolution of the spirit. In a sermon dated 28 November 1494, the day that the French troops departed, Savonarola proclaims that:

"living uprightly...cannot be done except through continuous prayer, and cannot be done well unless you devote yourself to simplicity, which today seems to be lost and extinguished among men, for everyone tries to be richer and more important, shunning simplicity." <sup>28</sup>

This ultimately comes to mean that anything seen as causing Christians to turn toward the *base pleasures* of sense and therefore away from God, is considered an "instrument of vanity" and consequently forbidden. "Vanities" could be something as significant as works of art or simple items such as playing cards, musical instruments or a pearl encrusted comb but no matter the size, all vanities are disallowed and if discovered, dispatched with large bonfires. In addition to restrictions placed on the ownership of certain tangible items, curfews are established and regulations set requiring women to have a male chaperone when on the street.<sup>31</sup>

Enforcement of this new puritanical code is handled in large part by "fanciulli,"<sup>32</sup> gangs of boys between the ages of six and sixteen referred to as Savonarola's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Donald Weinstein, "Savonarola, Florence, and the Millenarian Tradition," *Church History, Vol.* 27, No. 4 (Dec., 1958), 297.

Weinstein, 1958, 291-299.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Savonarola, 147.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City, Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 116.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Dunant, 303.

<sup>31</sup> Dunant, 249.

Martines, 116.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 183.

"Angels." young men who have undergone "an intensive regimen of personal discipline and reeducation"34 in order to serve as "shock troops"35 in Savonarola's war on sin. Utilizing the existing aggressiveness of Florence's youth culture, Savonarola organizes what ultimately becomes roving tribunals with the authority to not only censure minor transgressors, but administer corporal punishment to those deemed guilty of more severe infractions. Considering themselves "warriors of God" and thereby sanctioned as moral police, their aggressiveness intensifies to the point of intimidation. It is in this respect that Luca, who informs Alessandra that he is in "God's army"37 now, as he menacingly reminds her of the new rules concerning unchaperoned women, becomes fully Machiavelli's lion.<sup>38</sup> His not so thinly veiled threat regarding the fact that Alessandra has travelled alone to visit her parents allows us to see that Luca is relishing his new found power. The fact that he describes himself as being in "God's army," rather than one of Savonarola's "Angels" proves that he sees this authority as an opportunity to utilize physical violence.

Tomaso's crafty nature is brought to bear on another sin that Savonarola strives to purge from Florentine society, the "abominable vice" of sodomy, one which blurs the divinely created distinctions between the sexes.<sup>40</sup> Given Savonarola's literal, logical and ultimately sterile understanding of the Bible, he condemns it on the grounds that it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Dunant, 208.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Weinstein, 2011, 183.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Weinstein, 2011, 185.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Dunant. 207.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Dunant, 228.

<sup>38</sup> Dunant, 228.

Dunant, 280.

Weinstein, 2011, 183-185.

Martines, 118-120.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup>Weinstein, 183.

<sup>40</sup> Rocke, 13.

is "contrary to nature".41 Up until now, despite the fact that it is illegal and considered disgraceful, sodomy is more or less tolerated. The explanation for this paradox stems from sociological circumstances surrounding the institution of marriage. In order to allow men of the Florentine Renaissance to establish themselves financially, marriage is customarily delayed until they are into their thirties, while women traditionally marry in their teens. This results in an expanse of time with little or no opportunity for men to have sexual relations with women of their own class. Consequently, what would be considered homosexual relations today is seen as "sexual solace and companionship during the prolonged years of adolescence and bachelorhood,"42 a "temporary wayward turn on a boy's path to full-fledged manhood". 43 It is looked upon as an element of male sexuality involved in the formation of male gender identity. However, there are rules that must be observed if one's activities are to be seen as developmentally appropriate rather than blatantly homosexual. In keeping with the notion that this is just a passing phase, the younger one is the easier it goes for him in the event that he is charged with the crime of sodomy. When determining whether and to what degree to punish the accused, it is also taken into consideration whether he is the passive partner or in the active role. For those who are charged with sodomy, reprimand typically comes in the form of a fine. As Cristoforo relates to Alessandra, "as long as enough money changed hands all would be forgiven and forgotten."44 Under these conditions, both Tomaso and Cristoforo are relatively safe, but all of this changes with Savonarola's rise to power.<sup>45</sup>

In an effort to ensure that this New Jerusalem is morally pure, Savonarola

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Rocke, 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Michael Rocke. *Forbidden Friendships Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Rocke, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Dunant, 153.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Martines, 284.; Weinstein, 155.; Rocke, 3-16.

implements the "harshest law against sodomy in Florentines' living memory". <sup>46</sup> Fines become a thing of the past, and transgressors under the age of eighteen are punished at the Council's discretion. First time offenders are publicly pilloried<sup>47</sup> for a minimum of one hour, with penalties increasing in severity according to the number of offenses. Repeat offenders are frequently bound, put on display and marched to the Old Market to be branded on their foreheads. In addition to the aforementioned penalties, convicted sodomites are disqualified from office and ineligible for public honors. Finally, those convicted a third time are to be burned alive. <sup>48</sup> The very real possibility of torture, if not death by public burning brings Tomaso to the realization that, as Machiavelli acknowledges, "it is not necessary for a prince to have" certain qualities, "but it is certainly necessary to seem to have them". <sup>49</sup> It is at this point that Tomaso becomes fully Machiavelli's fox and devises the distraction that is Alessandra's marriage as protection for himself and his lover.

Given Alessandra's reference to Cristoforo as "our husband,"50 it would appear that (according to Machiavelli's frequently misquoted assertion) for Tomaso the end has indeed justified the means. However, a less referenced exhortation by Machiavelli is, "it cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow-citizens, to betray one's friends, to be without loyalty, without mercy, without religion; by such methods one can acquire power, but not glory."51 Tomaso may have gained a certain power over his sister, but the boils he has contracted most decidedly indicates a shortage of glory. Be that as it may, a rift clearly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Weinstein, 2011, 155.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Being pilloried is to be attached to a wooden framework erected on a post, with holes for securing the head and hands, formerly used to expose an offender to public derision. (per dictionary.com)

<sup>48</sup> Weinstein, 2011, 155.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Machiavelli, 2004, 76.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Dunant, 212.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Machiavelli, 2004, 37.

exists in Alessandra's marriage, one which is more than simply a matter of a third party coming between husband and wife. Alessandra and Tomaso's respective relationships with Cristoforo are incomplete and founded on contrasting aspects of the marital relationship, rendering neither capable of a sound relationship with *their husband*. Alessandra and Cristoforo enjoy a respectful affection born of intellectual exchange, political conversation and a shared love of the arts. Tomaso's relationship with Cristoforo is primarily physical.

Up to this point our discussion has largely functioned on the level of primary meaning, while collecting information essential to the second/historical layer upon which Alessandra's story rides. Now that the necessary groundwork has been laid, we are prepared to put it all together. The novel's pivotal moment occurs with the arrival of King Charles' army. Given that the approaching troops trigger a transition not only for Alessandra herself, but the citizens of Florence and Savonarola as well, it becomes clear that our protagonist stands as an allegory for the city of Florence. As Alessandra's marriage is fractured, so is Florence.

Cristoforo's home is clearly characterized by division, which is also evident on the Florentine level of our allegory. As previously mentioned, prior to the French army's arrival, Florentine culture is infused with Humanism's return to the ancients, and its corresponding Platonic love of beauty and intellectual endeavors. As also noted, the arrival of King Charles's troops brings about a transition in Savonarola's already literal, dry, inflexible message, inciting its expansion from simple penitent preaching to millennialistic aspirations. It is here that the rupture in Florentine society occurs, bringing forth Savonarola's puritanical codes of behavior that we have discussed with

some detail and the surrounding tensions. Critical to understanding this allegory is the fact that Alessandra literally gives birth on the day of "the war against the monk," a day when, like Tomaso, Savonarola has also been denied glory.<sup>52</sup> As Alessandra's child is born on this day, so, too, a new Florence comes into being, one that does indeed become the first city of a new age. Savonarola's vision has come to pass, just not in the way that he had planned.

Savonarola's downfall comes about as a result of several converging factors. His aborted ordeal by fire opens the proverbial door for Florence's anti-Savonarola contingent to gain traction, resulting in the (now republican) Signory's passage of a vote enforcing Pope Alexander VI's edict prohibiting Savonarola to preach. This mood shift spreads to the general citizenry, who well up against Savonarola in an assault on San Marco. He is arrested for heresy, subjected to the strappado and ultimately hanged and burned (along with two of his disciples), but not before being defrocked. In an effort to eradicate any possible relics which might effectively keep Savonarola alive, his ashes were shoved into the Arno River.<sup>53</sup> Clearly Savonarola does not succeed in transforming Florence into a New Jerusalem. However, the "Rinascimento" that Florence has cultivated spreads throughout Europe and it is in this regard that she becomes the first city of a new age.<sup>54</sup>

Where Cristoforo's house is characterized by division, Santa Vitella's Convent is a point of reconciliation. At the plot level Alessandra, now Sister Lucrezia, 55 has come

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Dunant, 339.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Martines, 219-281.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Dunant, 212.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> The name is chosen for St. Lucretia, who committed suicide due to the shame associated with having sex with a man other than her husband. She was one of the Sabine

to terms with her past. She takes charge of her life even to the point of controlling her own death, employing a Machiavellian principle in the process. After her life as Cristoforo's wife and her experience with his "death," Alessandra has clearly learned "to be a great feigner and dissembler..." Unlike her mother, Alessandra's daughter Plautilla, grows up in an environment where her talents are nurtured and once again, there is history behind the storyline. Alessandra and Plautilla's life and work in a convent parallels that of Plautilla's namesake Suor Plautilla Nelli, who is considered to be the first acknowledged female painter of Florence. Nelli lived in and taught painting at a convent known "throughout Italy for the 'number and significance' of its nunartists". 57

With the painter's arrival at Santa Vitelli's Convent and the sexual reunion that ensues comes both allegorical reconciliation as well as the *Viniculum Mundi* <sup>58</sup> that was lacking in Alessandra's marriage to Cristoforo. The painter remains unnamed, indicating that he embodies the intangible. His spiritual nature is foreshadowed in a young Alessandra's semi-formed idea about how "artists somehow came directly from God and therefore had more of the spirit and less of man about them".<sup>59</sup> It is also made explicit, although disguised as sexual satisfaction, in Alessandra's thoughts of how the

Women and as such this choice of names is foreshadowed in Plautilla's marriage chest. "St. Augustine and Suicide", (*Westminster Wisdom*, April 26, 2010), http://gracchii.blogspot.com/2010/04/st-augustine-and-suicide.html (Accessed 20 September, 2012).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince*, Translated by Luigi Ricci, (New York: Signet, 1996), 93. <sup>57</sup> Jane Fortune. "Orate pro pictorial-Prayer For the Painter. Sister Nelli Gets Her Due", *The Florentine*, (Issue No 42/2006/October 19, 2006). <a href="https://www.theflorentine.net/articles/article-view.asp?issuetocld=318">http://www.theflorentine.net/articles/article-view.asp?issuetocld=318</a> (Accessed 17 September, 2012).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Dunant, 148.

Viniculum Mundi refers to the neo-platonist notion of love as a binding force in the world, of God's love for humanity, humanity's love for one another in addition to their love for God, so that love is circular, beginning and ending in God.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Dunant, 14.

light of God changes the substance of matter. Up until now, we have witnessed a physical, literal / intellectual, philosophical divide. Our painter fulfills the spiritual component that has been heretofore missing to form the mind/body/spirit triumvirate. The painter more or less spells things out for us with his recognition that Alessandra has "always been Eve." 60 The snake that he paints on Alessandra's body (and she ultimately tattoos upon herself) in the course of their reunion speaks to a return to Eden with its *Axis Mundi*. It is at this moment that all the layers of the novel are brought into alignment and Alessandra transcends simple allegory to become fully symbol, as the spiritual center of the Renaissance, with her progeny paving the way to the next epoch.

Alessandra speaks of letters she receives over the years, letters that chart

Plautilla and the painter's path. As Eve partook of fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, it is
a resurgence of knowledge throughout Europe that Plautilla represents, the return to the
ancients mentioned in the novel's beginning pages. Her last letter comes from England
with mention of a young king "eager for artists to make his court great," a king who will
marry six times over the course of his life, a fact that anticipates the aforementioned
upcoming age, the Reformation.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Dunant, 382.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Dunant, 385.

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