

Cara Giulia,

You may find this rather long letter surprising, even a bit irritating. I hope you won't be angry, but I have to write to you. As I told you somewhat brusquely, I cannot understand how you sometimes look at painting in such a way that you don't see what painter and painting are showing you.

We have the same passion for painting, so why, when it comes to interpreting certain works, are our interpretations so dissimilar? I'm not saying that works of art have only one meaning and so there's only one "good" interpretation. Gombrich said that, and you know my thoughts on the matter. No; what concerns me is rather the sort of screen (made up of texts, quotations, and outside references) that you sometimes seem to want—at all costs—to put up between you and the work, a sort of sun filter to shield you from the work and safeguard the acquired habits on which our academic community agrees and in which it recognizes itself. This isn't the first time our opinions have differed, but this time, I'm writing to you. Not really with the hope of winning you over to my point of view, but perhaps with that of making you question your firmly held beliefs, and of shaking up certain convictions that, in my opinion, are blinding you.

I'm not going to bring up Jacopo Zucchi's *Amor and Psyche*. There would be, as you can imagine, a lot to say about it after the interpretation you proposed last month. Perhaps some other time. I will only mention here your lecture on Tintoretto's *Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan*. Several times you hit the nail on the head and you made me see what I hadn't seen. For example, you are right to say that Vulcan, leaning over Venus's naked body in the bed, is reminiscent of a satyr coming upon a nymph. I like that idea of the husband's unanticipated desire when he sees his wife's beautiful body. But the conclusions I draw from

this are not the same as yours. Likewise, when you say that the eroticism of this body, generously exposed to view, encourages women who look at the painting to identify with the goddess of love, you're off to a good start. When, however, under the pretext that only Vulcan is worthy of esteem, whereas Venus is ashamed and Mars ridiculous, you interpret this to mean that this encouragement is a moral one and that Tintoretto uses the power of the picture and the seduction of his paintbrush to channel female desire (these are not your words, but they're close), I just don't get it.

For example, you say that Venus, caught in the act, is trying to conceal her nudity. But what makes you think she is not, on the contrary, trying to *reveal* it to seduce Vulcan? Why couldn't there be some humor in this painting? I have the feeling that you—ordinarily so cheerful—did not want to “do” art history joyfully. As if it were your professional duty not to laugh or even smile, which would not be “serious.” *Serio ludere*, play seriously: yet you know this proverb from the Renaissance, and the Renaissance's taste for laughter and paradox. It's as if in order to be taken seriously you had to take *yourself* seriously, to be *seriosa* and not *seria*, as you say in Italian, to show your credentials to those cemetery guardians who cloak themselves in the so-called dignity of their discipline and, in the name of cheerless scholarship, never want us to laugh when we look at a painting. You, Giulia, *seriosa*? Oh, please!

Tintoretto

Mars and Venus

Surprised by Vulcan

Alte Pinakothek,

Munich

So, if you haven't already tossed this letter out, let me start over. I agree that in this painting Tintoretto has an unexpectedly new take on the hackneyed theme of “Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan.” Usually, Mars and Venus are naked, lying together in their adulterous bed, caught in the web that Vulcan, forewarned by Apollo, drops on them. There's none of that in the painting in Munich. Venus is indeed naked, and she's stretched out on the bed. But she is alone. Mars is hiding under the table, wearing his armor, his helmet on his head, while Vulcan, with one knee on the bed, is raising the sheer cloth that conceals his wife's sex. Next to him, under the window in a cradle, Cupid is sleeping soundly. The subject had never been treated like this before



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and never would be again. According to you, by representing it in such a paradoxical way, Tintoretto, using a counterexample, wanted to pay tribute to the merits of marital fidelity. This wouldn't be the first time Venus's infidelity would be used to frighten newlyweds.

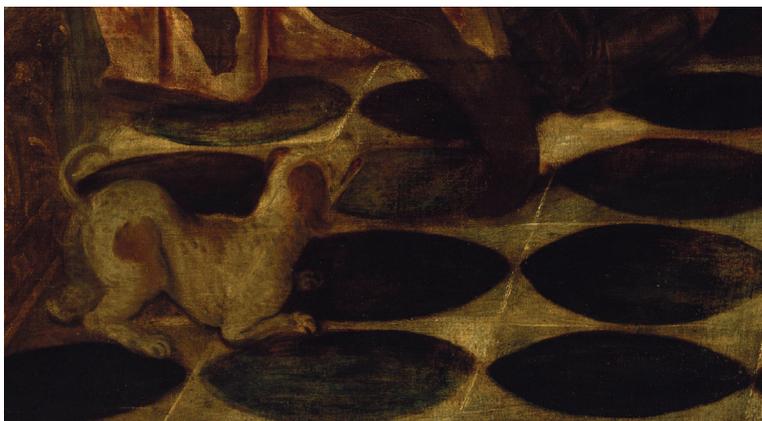
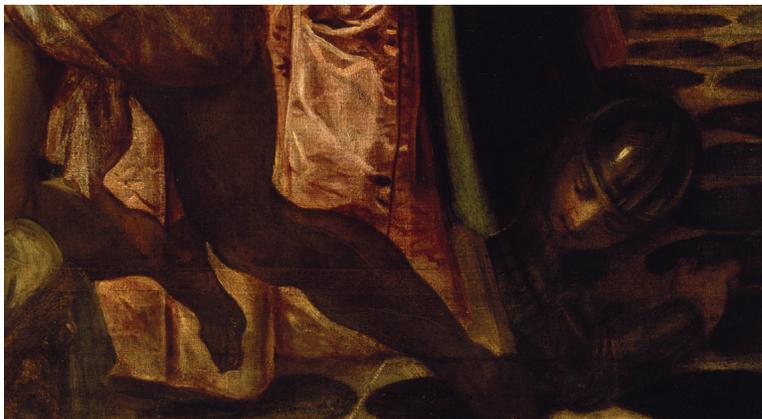
Granted. To support your thesis, you cite a number of texts published in Venice condemning both adultery and erotic images. Now I'm confused. It's not because these texts exist, or even because they were published at the same time the painting was painted, that they necessarily contribute to explaining it. That would be too easy. Opposing attitudes and viewpoints can exist simultaneously in a given society. You know that as well as I do. To support your viewpoint, you went so far as to suggest that the painting could be alluding to an episode in Tintoretto's private life and was addressed to his young wife. But that's going much too far. First of all, we know nothing about such an incident in Tintoretto's life and, if the painting can be dated to circa 1550 (and you yourself proposed this), that was probably the year Tintoretto got married: he was thirty-two years old. It's not because he would wind up some forty years later resembling his Vulcan that you already have to see here a veiled self-portrait, or even Tintoretto's representative in the painting. Okay?

Now I'm getting to the main point. Your interpretation relies on a simple principle, which you laid out in approximately these terms: Tintoretto's *Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan* is not a usual representation of the subject, so it must be an allegory. That's cutting a few corners, wouldn't you say? Everything that is unusual is not necessarily allegorical. It may be sophisticated, paradoxical, parodic, whatever. Comic, for example. You pointed out that Mars was ridiculous, half hidden under the table with his helmet on his head. But you raced to throw a moral blanket over this farcical situation. According to you, Mars's ridiculous position demeans the lover in order to highlight the melancholic dignity of the scorned, old husband. But what melancholic dignity? Vulcan is just as ridiculous! Take a look! What is this scorned husband really doing?

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What is he looking for between his wife's thighs? Proof of what? Traces of what Mars may have left there? Okay, I'll drop it. His gesture and his gaze make me think of one of Pietro Aretino's naughty pranks rather than of some moral counsel. In fact, the way Tintoretto presents him to us, poor Vulcan is not only lame but after so much pounding on his anvil, he must have become deaf as a doorknob, too. Look at the evidence: he doesn't even hear the dog. And yet, the dog is making a lot of noise, yapping away to indicate where Mars is hiding. A nasty little piece of work, that dog! But Vulcan doesn't hear a thing. And do you know why? Not so much because he's deaf, but because he's got other things on his mind.



At this precise moment (and Tintoretto has done everything to show us that he's representing a single moment), Vulcan forgets what he has come looking for. He's distracted. What he sees between his wife's thighs makes him blind (and deaf) to everything else. That's all he can see, that's the only thing he can think about anymore. I'm not making this up. Just look in the large mirror behind him to see what's going to happen next.

And let me say a few words about this mirror. You didn't mention that it was oddly positioned. Not only does it block part of the window facing us, but it's set very low against the wall, practically at the height of Venus's bed and lower, in any case, than the cradle where Cupid is sleeping. In fact, if you look closely, it's not hanging on the wall; it must be resting on a piece of furniture concealed from our gaze by the table under which Mars has hidden. What's it doing there? What's the point of placing a mirror so low? To reflect Venus's lovemaking? It's possible. I don't doubt you could find this sort of setup in sixteenth-century Venice. But this hypothesis leads us even further away from a moralizing depiction. Unless it's not really a mirror. You said it could possibly be Mars's shield. In that case, it's a bizarre kind of shield. It's not just its size that bothers me (it's really huge), it's also, and especially, the fact that it can be used as a mirror. I thought it was Perseus's shield that was smooth and polished to the extent that it could petrify Medusa. True, Aeneas also had a mirror-shield, as Erasmus Weddigen reminds us in relation to this painting. It was an enchanted shield, made by the Cyclops, and it allowed the future, grandiose destiny of Rome to appear on its surface. This juxtaposition is arbitrary (indeed, you didn't even mention it), but it works for me. Precisely because of what we see in Tintoretto's mirror-shield. You only mention the reflection (barely visible) of a second mirror, "offstage," on our side of the scene. This would be Venus's makeup mirror, located on the edge of the bed and reflected in Mars's shield (a lovely image, by the way, of shared desire: the woman's mirror reflected in the man's shield, which transforms it into a mirror of love). Weddigen also mentions this offstage mirror,

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but since you didn't say anything about his text, I am putting aside the optical reconstruction he proposes and the conclusions he draws from it. They are very different from yours, but it doesn't matter. For you, this mirror that we don't see, this hidden mirror, is what allows Venus to see Vulcan arrive from behind even though her back is turned to the door—and you brilliantly contrasted this mirror, instrument of deceit, to the other, leaning against the wall, revealing the truth. Granted. But what truth are we talking about?

Both you and Weddigen speak a great deal about Venus's reflection in the mirror of Mars's shield. I certainly am not one to object to your interest in a barely visible detail. But neither of you say anything about what is clearly apparent in this same shield: Vulcan, seen from behind, leaning over Venus's body. But take a closer look: it's an odd reflection, strange, abnormal. And here's why: From his gesture nearest to Venus to his reflection in the mirror, Vulcan's position has changed. Look! In the foreground, only his right knee is on the bed; his left leg is stretched out, a bit stiff (that's only natural; he limps), and his left foot is on the

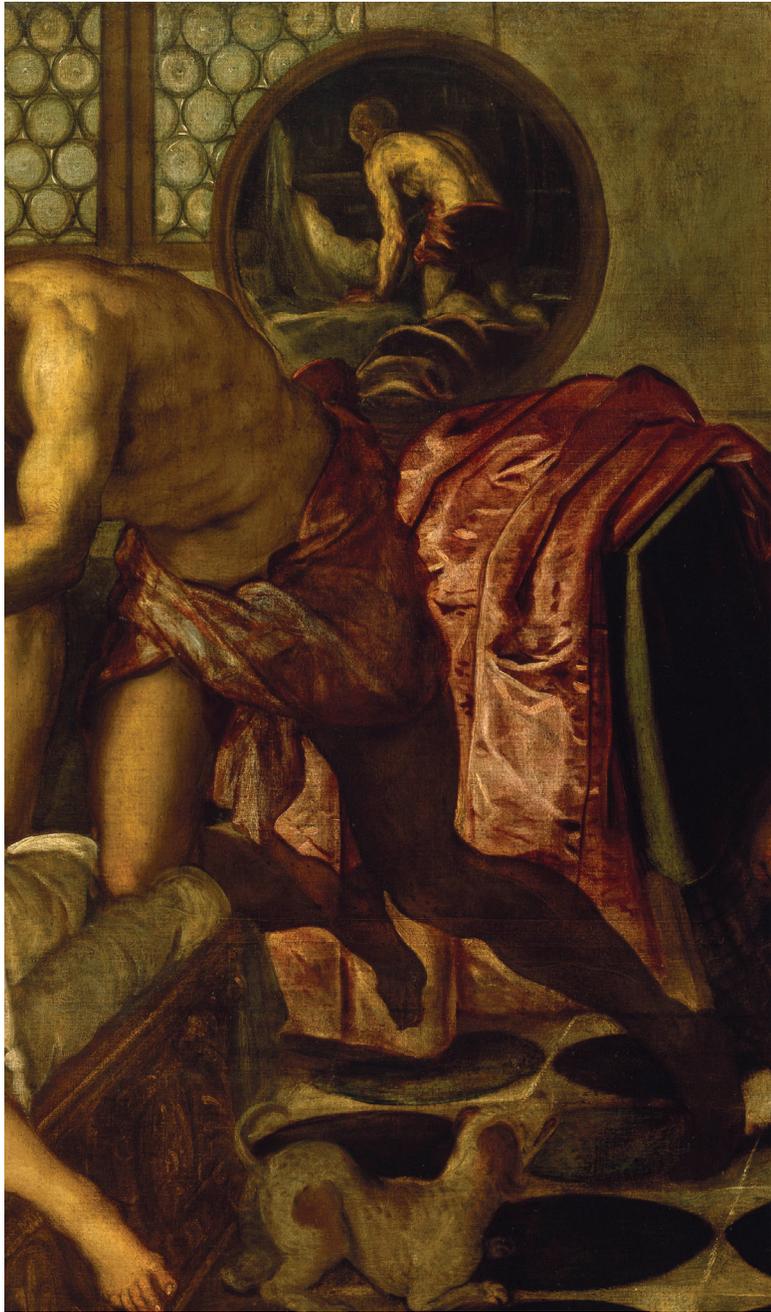
ground, quite far from the bed. In the mirror, on the contrary, as we could see quite clearly in the detail you projected, Vulcan seems to have his left knee (which has become his right knee in the reflection) resting on the edge of the bed. I don't think for a second that this is due to some clumsiness or carelessness on the painter's part. Quite the opposite, in fact. Facing us, in full view, the mirror shows us what is going to happen the instant *after* the one that is depicted in the foreground: Vulcan is going to climb on the bed—and we can easily imagine what will occur next. Does that seem preposterous to you? It shouldn't; if it is truly Mars's mirror-shield, it functions like Aeneas's to show us the (very near) future of this comic scene. And if, as you believe, it's a mirror that reveals the truth, it's pointing to what we are supposed to learn from the scene we are seeing, the moral of the fable. What remains to figure out is what truth, what moral(ity) we're dealing with here.

Tintoretto
preparatory sketch
for *Mars and Venus
Surprised by Vulcan*,
ca. 1550
Kupferstichkabinett
(SMPK), Berlin



What, in fact, is happening to Vulcan? He came to interrupt the not-yet-begun lovemaking of Venus and Mars. However, rather than listening to the dog, he goes looking for the proof of his alleged misfortune between his wife's thighs. But, according to what the mirror shows us, what he sees makes him forget everything else. He is under the spell of his wife's sex, and he finds himself—these are your words—aroused like a satyr coming upon a nymph. Weddigen, for his part, suggests Tarquin about to rape Lucretia. On the surface, this connection is paradoxical—after all, Vulcan and Venus are married and she is the unfaithful one. But in fact it's rather clever, because the fit of sexual passion in which Vulcan is caught is very explicit in the preliminary study for the painting in Berlin: in the absence of Mars, Cupid, and the dog, Venus seems to want to flee, whereas Vulcan wholly resembles a rapist about to act. In the painting, the context of this typical pose makes it lose its explicit violence: Vulcan is no longer (in the foreground) anything but an old man who is still virile (in the mirror). As I see it, this (rare) gap between the scene and its reflection is essential to the idea that Tintoretto had of his painting, to what was called his *invenzione*, which condenses the comic center of the painting and the moral that can be drawn from the comic scene that Tintoretto imagined, using Ovid as his starting point.

Because this painting is funny. Pardon me for harping on that, Giulia, but I must, because it never even occurred to you—sorry if I'm being a bit heavy-handed here. Mars is ridiculous, hiding under the table like a lover in the closet. Vulcan is comical, letting himself be caught once again, blinded by Venus's *fente*. The little runt of a dog is comic as well, barking away furiously in vain. Even the sleeping Cupid is comic: exhausted by his own efforts, he defeats himself (not *Omnia vincit Amor*, but *Amorem vincit Amor*). The glass vase on the windowsill is more subtle because it is no doubt more irreverent: you have to smile because it irresistibly calls to mind the transparency of the virgin vase of Mary “who never knew a man.” And even the perspectival construction could play a latent comic role: it dramatizes the scene by



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leading our gaze toward the door where Vulcan came in, but in the same glance, with a movement emphasized by Mars's pointing index finger, guides our eyes toward the forge that has obviously gone cold. Whose "forge" is it? Is it Vulcan's? Or is it Venus's, which Vulcan, having allowed it to stop burning through his own fault, must attempt to reignite?

Finally, Venus is the only one who is not really funny. No doubt she finds herself in an uncomfortable position; she risked humiliation and ridicule. But once again, and contrary to what Ovid says, she will get away with everything with the tiniest of effort, or at the smallest price. How much does it cost to sleep with Venus? What gift will her satisfied husband offer her? In any case, it isn't on this occasion that Vulcan will catch her in the act and make all the gods laugh at her expense. He'll be so busy that he won't see or hear Mars tiptoeing out in his armor. So if this fable has a moral (racy and chauvinist, of course), this is it: women are all alike—harlots, cheating seductresses who betray us men, who exploit our blindness, who play with us and our desire, who lead us by the nose (or rather, by the sex) and drag us all down to the level of either young oafs obliged to hide under a table or contented cuckolds.

So, my conclusions are radically different from yours. You might say that all this is amusing, clever, fine and dandy, but it's only my subjective interpretation, and I have no text to support what I am saying. Wrong! Because of you, thanks to you, in order to write to you and for you to take me seriously, I went looking for the literature. It didn't take me long to find it. But the credit doesn't belong to me. It belongs to Beverly Louise Brown, who refers to a multitude of texts against marriage published at the time in Venice, in the tradition of Juvenal, Boccaccio, and Erasmus. She cites Anton Francesco Doni, Lodovico Dolce, and the farces, stories, and other *commedie erudite* whose characters are mismatched couples, betrayed husbands, and ridiculous cuckolds. Her article is faultless and, in all honesty, the context she provides seems more pertinent, more convincing than the references you used. But, deep down, it doesn't matter. What I find more significant

is that I don't need texts to *see* what's happening in the painting. My students can attest to this: I've been talking about paintings this way for a long time. This is perhaps the main thing that sets us apart. It's as if you started from the literature, as if you needed texts to interpret the paintings, as if you trusted neither your eyes to see nor the paintings to show you what the painter wanted to express.

Another thing. You wanted at all costs to find a matrimonial theme in this painting. Sure, why not? Painting a painting against marriage is still treating a matrimonial theme. But you want a "matrimonial" painting to exalt marriage. That's nothing but a received idea, the disastrous consequence of the (Anglo-Saxon to begin with, I believe) mania of seeing "wedding portraits" in every painting of naked women. At first, this hypothesis was not wrong, and it led to some good results. In Renaissance Christian society, after all, it was marriage that legitimized sexuality. (Marguerite de Navarre said it was a "cover.")

In mythology, it's marriage that authorizes nudity to be seen. (And just barely. . . .) But everything can't be simplified that way. In 1550, a naked woman is not unusual in painting. This is why the Church began to be concerned. And then, as for this *Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan*, who knows to whom the painting was addressed? You said so yourself: we don't know anything about its origins or the circumstances under which it was commissioned. Because of its style, it is now dated to about 1550, but we still don't know for whom or at whose request it was painted. Cupid's pose alludes to one of Michelangelo's marbles that belonged to the Gonzagas of Mantua, and sometimes it is thought that the painting was meant to go to the Gonzagas. But it was not part of the Gonzaga collection sold in 1623, and this hypothesis has remained very shaky. In fact, we know nothing about the painting before 1682, when it was sold in England. Moreover, as Beverly Louise Brown also emphasizes, it left no trace in the work of contemporary artists. In other words, hardly had it been painted and it dropped out of sight. That's surprising for the work of such a master. Let's come up with our own hypothesis: What if it had been painted for one of the

grand courtesans of Venice at the request of one of her lovers, perhaps even a young Gonzaga? When I mentioned this hypothesis to you, you didn't want to consider it. Why? You and I both know that in Venice some courtesans were esteemed, admired, and respected—except by the Church no doubt, but definitely by some clergymen. Must we imagine that they lived in servants' quarters, in sordid brothels? That there were no paintings in the rooms where they received their guests and even sometimes held their salons? I'm thinking of the beautiful Tullia d'Aragona, and I believe that Tintoretto's *Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan* would have been quite at home in her salon, her bedroom, or her antechamber, that it would have satisfied the "decorum," as they used to say, and that everyone would have immediately noticed its comic strain.

I know you don't agree with this idea. I have neither texts nor archival documents to back me up and so all this is not historically serious. But I fear that "historically serious" is starting to look more and more like "politically correct," and I think we have to fight against a line of thought that claims to be "historical" while actually preventing us from thinking, making us believe "incorrect" painters never existed. That is the principle of classic iconography, without which it would be completely at a loss. Jean Wirth wrote some smart things about that at the beginning of his *Image médiévale*.

I don't know if you'll have read this to the end. I hope so. You are the only one to whom I could send such a letter. I know you like to question received ideas—even when they are your own. Do you recall our discussion about Mantegna's *Camera degli Sposi*? We didn't agree about that either. And what if it were marriage that was keeping us apart?

Con tanti abbracci vigorosi.

L'Hospitalet, July 2000