The Allure of Artifice: Titian’s Half-Lengths and the Courtesan as Masquerader*  

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Introduction

Titian’s Flora (Figure 1) depicts a young, fair-skinned and fair-haired woman dressed in a diaphanous white camicią, an undergarment commonly worn by Renaissance women. Although the camicią fully covers the woman’s arms and torso, it has fallen from her left shoulder, exposing most of her left breast. A length of rose-colored damask is draped loosely over her shoulder and around her waist, an incongruous adornment given her partial nudity. The subject’s half-undone coiffure, with much of her golden hair loose over her shoulders, implies that she is situated in an intimate setting. However, Titian (ca. 1488-1576) has omitted any details that would confirm a specific context. Instead, the figure appears against a simple backdrop of subtly modulated brown tones. In the absence of a clearly articulated environment that would illuminate the figure’s identity, her gestures and the few attributes that Titian imparts to her are the only means of interpretation. The small bouquet the subject clutches in her right hand has prompted her traditional identification with Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers and spring. However, the contemporary gold ring she wears on the knuckle of her middle finger belies her connection with this mythological figure, as Flora is usually portrayed fully immersed in the natural world, outside the realm of material adornments.

Although Flora is one of Titian’s most well-known female portraits, questions about the meaning of its iconography persist. It can be classified as belonging to a problematic genre of half-length female portraits painted in Venice in the first half of the sixteenth century, which often feature subjects wearing an exposed camicią or performing gestures that suggest that they are paused in the action of dressing or undressing. Rona Goffen characterizes such images as teasing, sensual and playful, contrasting them with Titian’s full-length nudes such as the Venus of Urbino, which she argues represent a type of chaste bride portrait. Similar, contemporaneous full-length female nudes, like Lorenzo Lotto’s Venus and Cupid (Figure 2), often feature iconographic markers, including jewelry, headpieces, or attendant figures, that further denote an interpretation of the figure as an idealized bride or as a mythological figure.

Conversely, the subject of Titian’s Flora wears a garment that is explicitly associated with everyday sixteenth-century feminine dress. The camicią distinguishes her from classicizing portraits of women that, through a complete lack of clothing, fully dissolve the subject’s contemporary identity into that of an allegorical ideal. Goffen asserts that Titian instead represents Flora as a liminal figure, changeable and multivalent, referencing both a classical nymph-like identity and a modern ideal of feminine desirability. Indeed, although Flora includes elements that could be interpreted as classicizing or mythologizing, like her bouquet of flowers and loose drapery, I argue that these operate as props employed by a contemporary woman rather than as traditional attributes or as unambiguous functions of identity. The subject holds the loose cluster of flowers aloft, seemingly ensuring that they are visible to the viewer even as she offers them to an unseen companion. She also creates a highly-articulated “V” shape over the damask drape with the middle and pointer fingers of her left hand, pressing them against the fabric as if to draw the viewer’s attention to its presence. These gestures, while graceful, do not read as relaxed or natural. Instead, they function as semi-theatrical signs that focus the viewer’s attention on the objects displayed against the sitter’s camicią. Titian presents the subject as a contemporary woman who adopts elements of an alternate mythological identity without diluting the proximity and availability of her body.
Figure 1. Titian, Flora, ca. 1515, oil on canvas, 31 3/8 x 25 in (79.7 x 63.5 cm). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Scala / Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali / Art Resource, NY.
The Allure of Artifice

In her dissertation, Christine Anne Junkerman interprets the contemporary clothing and accessories of the women that appear in half-lengths, as well as their insinuation of an uncommon intimacy with the viewer, as signs that the subjects of the portraits may be courtesans. This essay will argue that the subjects’ tantalizing manipulation of textiles, both in revealing their bodies and in dressing them in appealing guises, would also have drawn popular associations with courtesans. Further, I will argue that two of Titian’s half-lengths, Flora and a later painting of an unidentified woman (the so-called Portrait of a Young Woman [Figure 3], now in the Hermitage), are visual articulations of a fantasy in which, through play-acting and masquerade, the courtesan could fulfill the client’s desire for a multitude of sexual experiences with a variety of erotic personas.

In order to illuminate this fantasy, this essay will examine three contemporary sixteenth-century literary sources: a letter to a courtesan by Andrea Calmo (ca. 1510-1571), a Venetian playwright; Pietro Aretino’s (1492-1556) infamous collection of erotic poems and images, I modi; and Cesare Vecellio’s (1530-1601) De gli habiti antichi et moderni di diversi parti del mondo, a compendium of archetypal Venetian costume. These sources describe the courtesan’s eroticized imitation of patrician women, brides, goddesses and even boys, offering keys to interpreting the gestures and devices that Titian employed in his half-lengths.

Andrea Calmo and the Transformative Beauty of Textiles

Exquisite textiles served as primary tools of erotic masquerade in the sixteenth century. In Titian’s half-lengths, luxurious fabrics enhance the allure of his subjects; their garments inspire a longing for touch that ultimately stokes a desire for their bodies. An account of a dream detailed in a letter by playwright and actor Andrea Calmo likewise demonstrates the ways in which such textiles can aid in the articulation of a vivid, tactile fantasy. Calmo published more than 150 letters during his lifetime, including sixty that were ostensibly addressed to courtesans throughout Italy. The letter I will examine, written to a “Madame Olivietta,” details his fictional journey through a garden of sensuous delights to reach “Madame Venus,” the pinnacle of feminine beauty and an analog for the addressee.

Calmo recounts a walk through an impossibly fecund garden, blooming with jasmine and myrtle, plants associated with Venus and, by extension, with feminine beauty. As the author
passes through a doorway festooned with yet more blossoming plants, two fairies appear to him. The speaker apologizes for “having dared to enter a place into which he was not invited,” but the two servants before him dismiss his concerns, assuring him that he is “desired by a gallant lady who wants everything good for [him].” This lady, like a courtesan, awaits him somewhere more private, ensconced within an exquisite setting that seems to anticipate the beauty of the lady herself. Proceeding through a loggia, Calmo next encounters a set of doors decorated with the lady’s coat of arms and a chair with an inscription that reads: “throne of Venus.”

Calmo then enters a garden of cedars. He details the fine fabrics its inhabitants wear, including the “light blue veil(s)” draped “across the most delicate parts” of the winged youths who wait on him and the makings of the luxurious bed assembled for him. His resting place consists of “a mattress of crimson satin,” heaped with “three coverlets of yellow, green, and turquoise silk.” The five maidens who entertain him wear “the finest cambric worked in vertical ribbons.” The emphasis on the maidens’ garments in this passage may have been inspired by the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, first published in Venice in 1499. The protagonist of the tale, Poliphilo, provides a lengthy account of nymphs dressed in elaborate ensembles consisting of layered silks. The Hypnerotomachia nymphs wear:

Carpathian garments of the finest silk of various colors and textures…three tunics, one shorter than the other and distinct; the innermost of a purple hue, the next one over it of green woven with gold, the uppermost of the thinnest white fabric, wrapped and curled; cinched with cords of gold beneath their round breasts.

The descriptions of the appearance, texture, and imagined feel of fabrics laid out by both Colonna and Calmo allow readers a visceral experience of a sensual realm. In the case of Calmo’s letter, addressed to a courtesan, his imagined journey through this land adorned with textiles that are beautiful to the eye and beg to be touched, undertaken in order to reach “Madame Venus,” seems to further stoke his desire to see and touch his “Madame Olivieta.” Venus and her attendants present Calmo with several gifts of cosmetics. The bower in the garden prefigures the sensual delights of her bed; the costumes of the nymphs and attendants build anticipation for the pleasure of gazing upon the garments that ornament her body and the way in which they will play against her own flesh. Calmo refers to his attempts to translate ephemeral pleasures into words as “discourses, fairy tales, and fantasies (or chimeras),” descriptors that also fit the manipulations of identity in which Titian’s female subjects engage. In both Flora and the Portrait of a Young Woman, Titian employs realistic, lovingly rendered textiles to pique the viewer’s desire to stroke the garments the subject wears and to heighten anticipation of the revelation of the skin beneath them. Like Flora, the subject of Portrait of a Young Woman drapes a luxury garment over her basic camicia, wrapping herself in a soft, deep green velvet cloak lined with fur. She pulls the collar of the cloak toward her breast, the velvet showing traces of her fingers having grasped and moved through the fabric. Titian is precise in rendering evidence of touch and movement, using tight brushstrokes to indicate creases and areas of relative smoothness. The subject brings the fur to rest against her skin, its deep brown contrasting with her white flesh, and its lush, diffuse fibers tickling her smooth, bare chest.

Calmo teases the senses in a similar manner with descriptions of beautiful, lush fabrics and the manner in which they press against and caress the bodies of the inhabitants of the erotic realm through which he travels (for example, the way the gauzy fabric drapes the genitals of the winged servants). Both Calmo and Titian stimulate tactile senses to increase the erotic impact of their works. Titian further makes use of both luxury garments and camicie as tools of masquerade, suggesting that, like the yearning for Madame Olivieta that transports Calmo, their erotic power can transport their partners to the mythological realm of Venus. This play with costume appears to manifest a fluidity of identity explicitly associated with courtesans. However, scholarly investigations of Titian’s half-lengths consistently conclude that he employed guises in an attempt to veil or diffuse overtly erotic elements.
Figure 4. Agostino Veneziano, after Marcantonio Raimondi, nine fragments regarded as the only surviving representations of Giulio Romano and Raimondi’s designs for the first edition of *I modi*, ca. 1520s, engraving, sheet 9.4 x 10.6 in. (24 x 27 cm). The British Museum, London. Photo: ©Trustees of the British Museum.

The Allure of Artifice

Aretino's *I modi* and the Erotic Guise

Although I argue that the loosely draped garments Titian's half-length subjects wear accentuate their partial nudity, such classicizing and mythological attributes have also been viewed as a form of censorship to make acceptable otherwise inappropriate exposure. Such is the case with the various iterations of *I modi*, a series of sixteen explicitly erotic sonnets with accompanying illustrations first printed around 1524. Although they were likely shared and reprinted secretly, due to their controversial subject matter, Vasari commented in his *Lives of the Artists* that the images seemed to turn up in the places one would least expect. Titian may have encountered *I modi* through his professional connections and close friendship with Pietro Aretino, who composed sixteen sonnets for the second edition of the volume, possibly published in Venice in 1527, when Aretino took up residence there.

Romano's initial images for *I modi* (Figure 4) were unique in that they depicted the sexual act without the mythological references that scholars such as Bette Talvacchia have argued Renaissance artists often employed to tamp down explicit eroticism. Later adaptations of the images, however, do feature mythological attributes. Among the surviving examples of these modified renditions are several woodcuts from the so-called former Toscanini volume, now in a private collection in Geneva. The illustration for *Position 7* (Figure 5), for instance, features a faun and a woman with a braided and looped nymph-like hairstyle. *Position 14* (Figure 6) depicts a female figure positioning herself atop a male figure lying on a cart pulled by Cupid.

Talvacchia assumes that the producers of such later editions must have added mythological attributes in an attempt to lend the collection an air of erudition, or perhaps even to render it less overtly pornographic. Indeed, if men viewed the later prints together in a homosocial setting, the coupling of apparently mythological figures could potentially be discussed in a multitude of ways. In addition to learning about various sexual positions, it is possible that viewers also conversed about some of the allegorical aspects of these unions, such as the connotations of the surrender of Persephone, the daughter of the grain goddess Demeter, to Pluto, god of the underworld, who is associated with the barrenness of winter. However, the primary purpose of the prints, to titillate and stimulate, would have remained quite clear. Even after the addition of mythological props and labels, the images remain highly explicit in their display of genitalia and depictions of the sexual act; thus, it cannot be assumed that these alterations would have diminished their blatant eroticism in the eyes of their sixteenth-century audience.

In addition to the mythological attributes that appear in the illustrations for later editions, Aretino's original accompanying text prominently features allusions to Roman gods and goddesses. Aretino's sonnet accompanying *Position 12* (Figure

The Allure of Artifice

7; see Appendix for full Italian text) portrays a coupling in which the two participants play-act an encounter between Mars and Venus. The woman begins by admonishing her partner for treating her so roughly. She chastises him for his aggressive and overly eager manner, chiding him that he should not behave in this manner when coupling with “Venus,” but instead should “be measured and polite.” Her partner replies that he is not Mars, but Ercole Rangoni, a son of a prominent Modenese family, a soldier, and a correspondent of Aretino. Rangoni then identifies the female speaker as Angela Greca, a Roman courtesan who also appears in Aretino’s *Ragionamenti*, first published in 1534. In that text, a courtesan named Nanna states that Greca is well known for her skill in cultivating and controlling jealousy amongst her lovers and is equally recognized for her learning. According to Aretino, Greca eventually adopted the professional alias of “Hortensia,” the name of a famed Ancient Roman female orator known for her education and eloquence.

The Mars-and-Venus conceit, one perhaps appropriate for an erudite courtesan, is woven throughout the encounter described in the sonnet, mingling fantasy with the tangible reality of the sexual act. Rangoni compliments Greca on the way she moves beneath him (“su la potta ballar fareste il cazzo, menando il culo e in su spingendo forte”); his partner enthusiastically agrees that their coupling is pleasurable (“Signor sì, che con voi fottendo sguazzo”). In the persona of Venus, she states that she is nevertheless fearful of Cupid using Mars’ arms against her in the midst of their union, as he is “only a crazy child [putto e pazzo].” Having decided to take on the role of Mars and play along, the man responds that Cupid, who is his “boy” and Venus’ son (“figlio”) looks after his weapons only so that they may be dedicated to the “Goddess of Idleness [la dea Poltronaria].” The couple role-play as Venus and Mars in a manner that clearly increases the excitement of the act and enhances the client’s pleasure.

Notably, the female speaker sets up the game, declaring herself Venus and warning her partner that although he is a god himself, he must display some measure of reverence and respect in order to be granted the privilege of enjoying her body. Although the male participant at first teases her for adopting such a lofty identity and implies that he is not well suited for the role of Mars, the woman’s vigorous movements beneath him and her apparent pleasure seem to encourage him to give himself over to the fantasy as well. The exchange between the couple in the sonnet accompanying *Position 12* articulates the types of inventive sexual experiences men imagined courtesans could offer. If, as Lawner argues, the production and distribution of *I modi* was to some extent tied to the world of courtesans and their practices, the later addition of mythological attributes to figures in the illustrations was not necessarily an attempt to employ learned allusions to detract from the explicit sexuality of the figures. On the contrary, Aretino may have deployed this strategy to evoke the courtesan’s erotic ability to move between various identities. In addition to encouraging the client to treat the courtesan’s body with respect, a mythological fantasy could also boost the client’s ego by allowing him to become, if just for a moment, a god himself. Titian’s half-lengths offer the same possibility. They present an alluring, available female body partially revealed beneath seductive textiles, along with the prospect of her momentary transformation, via costume, into a companion outside their usual realm of sexual experience.

The Erotic Metamorphosis of Titian’s *Flora*

In Aretino’s sonnets for *I modi*, fantasy play intensifies the pleasure of the couples to which he gives voice. In light of this conceit, Titian’s half-lengths can be reconsidered as combining the same manipulation of identity with a focus on the seductive look and imagined feel of textiles similar to that which Andrea Calmo employed in his account of the “Realm of Venus.” Titian’s *Flora* is the ideal starting point for this examination, as the mythological woman she appears to imitate is herself a particularly nebulous figure. She is sometimes regarded purely as a demi-goddess; however, as in the case of Boccaccio’s account of her origins as a prostitute deified for her largess, she is also frequently conflated with the ancient Roman archetype of the *meretrix*, or high-class prostitute. Thus, Titian’s *Flora* functions as a pictorial version of a courtesan type expressed in both contemporary Italian and ancient texts.

Titian juxtaposes Flora’s pale beauty against a dark, indistinct background. The contrast makes the creamy smoothness of her skin all the more inviting, and she appears even to radiate light
throughout her loose *camicia*. Although the garment is not completely translucent, Titian suggests that a beautiful body lies beneath. The roundness of her right breast, although fully concealed, is apparent beneath the pleated folds of her *camicia*, and the garment hugs the plump curve of her hip. Her attitude is demure—she gazes dreamily to the right, perhaps at a companion hidden from view. The composition of the painting casts the viewer as voyeur, as the subject does not return the viewer's gaze and seems unaware of an additional presence. Nonetheless, the viewer gazes upon her body in what is obviously a quasi-dressed state, one normally witnessed only by female servants or by men who were expressly admitted into the bedroom.\(^{40}\)

The artist further conveys a sense of intimacy through his manipulation of setting and composition. As is typical for Titian’s half-length works, the painting lacks an articulated background or specific historical or mythological context. Anne Christine Junkerman describes this ambiguous setting as an indication that Titian’s subjects are, at the very least, “not-outside.”\(^{43}\) I would further posit that although they wear contemporary garments, Titian’s half-length subjects do not belong to a particular time or place. They exist purely as foci of desire. The artist’s choice to present his subject from the waist up denotes a sense of physical proximity, as if the viewer and Flora occupy the same space. Junkerman argues that the Venetian half-length format was in part inspired by earlier devotional half-length images, which, in their suggestions of real presence and creation of an intimate, one-on-one relationship between the subject and viewer, constituted “a private image that is possessable.”\(^{42}\) Thus, Titian’s rejection of setting may serve to help the viewer to inhabit the fantasy of engaging with the tempting body before him.

Flora’s garment also emphasizes that the viewer glimpses the subject in a tantalizingly private moment. Cathy Santore has astutely interpreted *Flora* and other works featuring female figures in *camicie* as depicting women in a state of undress akin to the wearing of lingerie: that is, in an undone state that implies the sexualized display of undergarments.\(^{43}\) The abundance of golden hair that flows over Flora’s shoulders is another indication that she is in an intimate mode. Titian pays special homage to Flora’s tresses, painting irregular crimps and curls to imply that she has recently unpinned her *coiffure*.\(^{44}\) This is an excellent example, as David Rosand describes it, of Titian’s skill in “heightening the basic experience of the tactile appeal of flesh by setting it off against other kinds of texture.”\(^{45}\) The charming imperfections of Flora’s appearance suggest a transition from a highly formal self-presentation to one that emphasizes the undone beauty of the boudoir, although the painting and the subject’s appearance are both highly-constructed images.

I argue that the erotic charge of changeable female identities is embodied by the *camicia*.\(^{46}\) This undergarment, worn by Renaissance women of Titian’s era, here becomes symbolic of a seductive liminal state. Santore has extensively analyzed the various possible implications of this garment, which commonly appears in images that may depict courtesans in the guise of Flora.\(^{47}\) Among Santore’s compelling evidence for the relationship between the *camicia* and mythological guises in Renaissance culture is that it was a common costume for actors playing nymphs in contemporary theatrical productions.\(^{48}\) Conversely, Junkerman argues that the *camicia* alone cannot be interpreted as the costume of a nymph in the context of half-length female images, since it was always augmented in a theatrical setting by other pieces of clothing such as “short skirts and little boots.”\(^{49}\) I argue that the *camicia* in which Titian displays his subjects, while they do prompt associations with classical female figures and their drapery, are not intended solely to make allusion to nymph costuming. They also function as an indicator of a state of transition. In considering the history of artists’ use of specific garment types to suggest transformation, it is useful to point to the garment worn by the nymph Chloris, as she appears in Botticelli’s *Primavera*.\(^{50}\) This long-sleeved, diaphanous white garment, unlike the similar garments worn by the Three Graces in the painting, lacks decorative draping or pinning, and resembles the *camicia* in its straight cut. The *camicia*, then, by Titian’s time, had already developed at least some connection with female metamorphosis.

The half-length ensemble, as Junkerman describes it, also includes an accompanying drape of colored fabric. This outfit serves as the foundation for a more elaborate guise which the subject may be in the process of assuming or may have recently begun to strip away.\(^{51}\) Whether or not the swaths of luxury fabric are representative of actual sixteenth-century attire, their richness and beauty indicate wealth and suggest a sumptuous lifestyle. Surviving inventories of the contents of Venetian courtesans’ homes, such as the 1534 inventory of the possessions of Julia Lombardo, list
vast stores of clothing and fabrics. The Lombardo inventory notes, for example, that chests in one of the three bedrooms in the house contained “65 braccia of fabric and an abundance of silk and lace trimmings.” In addition, the inventory reports sixty-four camicie. Santore writes that most noblewomen were sent off to their husbands with an average of about twelve camicie.

Flora emphasizes the beauty of the shimmering fabric draped over her own camicia with a caressing gesture, sliding her left hand beneath it and extending two fingers to stroke it. In the National Gallery of Art in Washington’s catalogue for its 2006 exhibition on Venetian Renaissance painting, which included Titian’s Flora, Sylvia Ferino-Pagden offers a comprehensive overview of scholarly opinion on the “V” that the subject forms with her fingers. Ferino-Pagden explores the possibility that the sitter points to her genitals specifically to indicate her status as a bride and to offer access to her body for the first time, as well as that the “V” shape may be interpreted as a reference to Venus, the goddess of love who presided over the sexual act in any context. Giancarlo Fiorenza has further proposed that the “V” might serve as a proclamation of virtus, an appellation that would serve to idealize the subject if she was a bride. This argument, however, discounts the possibility that she could be a courtesan. In my estimation, Titian may have instead, or perhaps additionally, employed this gesture as a symbol for the subject’s sexual organs, making reference to them through correspondences in both the shape of Flora’s fingers and the pink color of the drape.

Since they viewed the subject’s body in a partially-undressed state, signifying their imaginary presence in her bedroom, men who owned images such as Flora could easily envision the possibility of impending interactions. I argue that ownership of such a painting may have implied ownership of the female body on display as well. Although other men may have been invited to view the painting, and thus to enjoy the subject’s body and some aspects of her sexual performance, they were in reality permitted only to witness signs of the owner of the painting’s possession and pleasure. As Simons asserts in her essay on seductive male Renaissance portraits, which, like half-length female images, may have been subjects of homosocial viewing, “fantasy could be all the more charged by a referential element, by the suggestion of some actual presence pre-existing the representation.” If the image, as I argue, reproduced tropes associated explicitly with sexual experiences with courtesans, the ability to draw on lived memories of what would come next in the erotic encounter that Titian represents would have been the owner’s unique privilege.

Vecellio’s De gli Habiti Antichi e Moderni di Diversi Parti di Mondo and the Courtesan’s Emulative Masquerades

Although paintings like Flora depict private moments, viewers of Titian’s half-lengths may have associated these images with courtesans’ masquerades as observed through their appearance on the streets and piazzas of Venice. Just as they flouted sumptuary laws by wearing expensive textiles and jewels, Venetian courtesans also frequently declined to wear the culturally proscribed yellow veil intended to proclaim their profession and distinguish them from wealthy wives. Instead, they engaged in a kind of parodic emulation of these patrician women. Cesare Vecellio, Titian’s cousin and the compiler of an exhaustive costume book, De gli Habiti Antichi e Moderni di Diversi Parti di Mondo, published in Venice in 1590, outlined in his text the many other ways in which courtesans were nearly indistinguishable from wives. According to Vecellio, they dressed in “the colors worn by brides,” although they wore a shorter fazzuolo, or veil, than the women they imitated, one that accommodated the exposure of their face, neck and breasts. One of Vecellio’s prints, however, depicts a courtesan (Figure 8) as largely shrouded by her outer garment. It is the fact that she unabashedly lifts her veil to expose her face that indicates that she is not an inaccessible noblewoman.

The dress of Vecellio’s bride (Figure 9) is more elaborately worked than that of his courtesan, but the courtesan’s dress evokes an imitative similarity in its layered skirts and style of bodice. The gesture Vecellio assigns to the courtesan can be considered an erotic imitation of that of the bride, or sposa non sposata. Whereas the bride is demurely covered by her veil and her bodice, exposing nothing but a sliver of her upper chest, the courtesan exposes her breasts as well as her face. The courtesan wishes to be seen and to display her face to prospective patrons. Revealing her true identity, Vecellio’s courtesan pulls at the fabric around her genitals in an effort to call attention to her sexual availability. This, too, is a version of the more modest gesture performed by Vecellio’s bride, who
The Allure of Artifice

lifts her skirt ostensibly to display the rich fabric of her underskirt. The bride’s gesture is refined and measured, drawing subtle attention to the imminent male access to her body while remaining within expected boundaries of public female behavior. By contrast, the courtesan’s gesture, as she grabs the fabric of her skirt in her fist, appears crude and vulgar; like Flora, she forms a “V” with her fingers, but they rest provocatively next to her genitals. This bride masquerade, observed on the streets of Venice and then synthesized and codified by Vecellio, represents one potential guise among many that the courtesan could assume in order to attract and please her clients. It is this perceived ability that Titian illustrates in his half-lengths.

The *camicia* Titian’s Flora wears functions like the veil of the bride-courtesan. It is a symbol, as Eugenia Paulicelli has defined it, of the “site of two opposing forces” of modesty and seduction. Titian maximizes Flora’s appeal by depicting her in a manner that oscillates between these two states. The artist renders the slipping of the *camicia* from her shoulder in such a way that it can be read either as a tantalizing unintentional exposure or as a calculated attempt to stoke desire. The fallen garment visually echoes the curve of her left breast and tantalizes the viewer with the possibility of a peek at her nipple, manifesting a state that conveys both dress and undress and neither fully obscures the body of the subject nor fully reveals it. The presence of an undergarment also suggests that the subject is, in this moment, caught between guises, not yet fully Flora and yet not simply her nude, undorned self, without any pretention of an alternative identity. I argue that the fantasy courtesan’s wearing of a *camicia*, a garment associated with transition, signals that she is able to vacillate between various desirable identities. Will she dress again in sumptuous attire that makes her like a noblewoman, or will she remove the garment to offer her body as a Flora amenable to the viewer’s attentions? Her identity is fluid; the inclusion of a clutch of flowers and the *camicia*, a garment associated with nymphs, suggest her relationship to Flora, but she could easily become someone else.
Titian's Portrait of a Young Woman and Erotic Plays with Gender

Titian's later so-called *Portrait of a Young Woman* (Figure 3) exhibits notable similarities to his *Flora*. Like Flora, the subject of this painting wears a loosely-draped *camicia* that falls teasingly from her shoulder, exposing the bare skin of her arms and chest. Unlike Flora, she wears her blond hair gathered up beneath her hat, rather than loose and flowing. However, her dark eyes, rosebud mouth, and long, straight nose resemble those of Flora. These similarities are evidence that Titian may have consciously produced variations on a type, creating images that could be used as visual prompts for fantasies with courtesans as their protagonists.

*Portrait of a Young Woman* presents such a fiction, articulated through an assemblage of signs of transformation. The female subject is again presented from the waist up and set against a dark background that removes her from an identifiable context. Although she is partially nude, her body is adorned with costly jewelry, marking her as extraordinary. She wears large teardrop pearl earrings, a pearl necklace and a bracelet made of gold and precious stones. The hat jauntily perched atop her head is ornately decorated and likely expensive as well. The brim of the red-gold hat is set off by what appears to be gold brocade wrapped in a second string of pearls, accented by a large, round brooch. None of the many feminine styles of hats documented in Cesare Vecellio's exhaustive costume book display the same voluminous and showy feathers, nor do they feature similarly large, bejeweled ornaments that may have served as emblems of family or fortune. In fact, the majority of Titian's female subjects are portrayed with bare heads. Those who do appear in a headdress wear one that is distinctly feminine in character, such as the richly-worked *scuffia* worn by Isabella D'Este in her portrait by Titian (Figure 10). Hats comparable to the one worn by the *Young Woman* can, however, be found in Titian's male portraits executed within several years of that painting, including his *Portrait of Ippolito de Medici* (Figure 11) and *Portrait of a Man Holding a Book* (Figure 12). The female subject's hat differs in shape from those featured in the male portraits, apparently made of a more structured, stiffer material. However, the masculine hats, which are decorated with feathers, and, in the case of the portrait of Ippolito de Medici, a brooch, are the closest cognates to be found in portraits of the period.

Thus, a study of contemporaneous visual sources suggests that the hat Titian's subject wears would appear out of place on a woman. In addition, he chose to paint it resting on her head in a haphazard fashion. This unorthodox position could imply that either she or a companion has intentionally set it on her head in this way to suggest a playful masquerade or guise. Likewise, the subject does not so much wear the fur-lined cloak that covers her left shoulder and lower torso as simply drape it loosely over her body. A similar garment appears in Giorgione's *Laura*, an earlier work of the half-length format. The female subject of that painting is dressed in a heavy red mantle lined with soft brown fur. It is evident that, like that of Titian's subject, Laura's cloak does not properly fit her body, as the fabric of the garment's left arm swallows up and completely hides her left hand. Titian may have imitated Laura's gesture in his *Flora* as well. Laura grasps the edge of the mantle, in the process of either pulling it across her chest to cover her exposed right breast or, perhaps, to reveal it further. Titian's subject performs this ambiguous gesture with both hands, playing at concealing or exposing both her breasts and lower torso.

In her study of Giorgione's *Laura*, Junkergerman's examination of similar mantles worn by men in the artist's *Adoration of the Magi* and in Carpaccio's *Leavetaking of the Betrothed Pair* leads her to convincingly identify the subject's garment as masculine. Junkergerman also suggests that, because Venetian women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, they would likely have had no need for such a heavy, enveloping outer garment. She further argues that tailored outer garments were worn almost exclusively by men. The simple veils and elegant, lighter winter garments worn by the women depicted in Vecellio's costume book may support Junkergerman's assertion that Venetian women wore fashionable, layered clothing outdoors rather than bulky coverings such as fur cloaks. With those references in mind, contemporary viewers would have identified both Laura's garment and the cloak draped over Titian's subject, as well as the hat she wears, as distinctly masculine. Titian, then, may have intended for the viewer to interpret the subject as wearing clothes that could belong to a well-appointed sixteenth-century Venetian man, perhaps the viewer himself.

Rona Goffen asserts that the fact that the subject of *Woman in a Fur Coat* (Figure 13)
The Allure of Artifice

Figure 10. Titian, *Isabella d’Este*, ca. 1534, oil on canvas, 40 x 25 in. (1.02 m. x 0.64 m). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

Figure 11. Titian, *Portrait of Cardinal Ippolito de’ Medici*, ca. 1533, oil on canvas, 54 x 42 in. (138 x 106 cm). Galleria Palentina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Photo: Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY.

Figure 12. Titian, *Portrait of a Man Holding a Book*, ca. 1540, oil on canvas, 38.5 x 30 in. (98 x 77 cm.) Boston: Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: © 2017 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 13. Titian, *Woman in a Fur Coat*, ca. 1535, oil on canvas, 37 x 24 in. (95 x 63 cm). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.
drapes herself with a masculine garment may indicate both a male presence and the sexual power
the subject holds over the man in question. Junkerman suggests that the masculine connotations
of Laura’s cloak in Giorgione’s similar composition may also insinuate that the man to whom the
garment belongs claims her body, using an article of clothing that can be connected to his own
body as a proxy. Alternatively, it is possible that the subject of Titian’s Portrait of a Young Woman
has dressed herself in clothing that her companion has recently set aside in an attempt to prolong
her teasing revelation of her own body. Since she is dressed in a camicia, she has evidently already
begun to undress, but now tantalizes her lover by making playthings of his garments. In encoun-
tering Titian’s Young Woman, as in gazing upon Giorgione’s Laura, viewers were “surprised and
delighted” by the unusual and incongruous sight of beautiful women wearing and removing male
garments in a seductive manner.

The Venetian fascination with erotic play with gendered clothing, like the more general idea
of sensual masquerade, finds its roots in the observed behavior of courtesans in the public sphere.
Courtesans were widely known for cross-dressing, a practice concealed beneath their outwardly
feminine garb and viewed as an exciting subversion of sexual norms. Two well-known Venerian
prints (Figures 14, 15, and 16) show courtesans out in public, dressed as noblewomen in a manner
similar to that of the women in Vecellio’s prints. However, the viewer may actually perform the
act of lifting the courtesan’s skirt, revealing the secret that she wears men’s breeches underneath.
Patricia Simons suggests that it is the contrast between projected femininity and a hidden play
with masculine garments that delights the viewer. Viewers might have found it thrilling to see
an attractive woman in male garments, especially knowing that a womanly body was concealed
beneath. These voyeuristic depictions of cross-dressing courtesans, which, unlike paintings, could
be held in the owner’s hands, offer a more immediate experience of the interaction between subject
and viewer implied by Titian’s half-lengths.

Figure 14. Pietro Bertelli, Cortegiana Veneta, from Diversarum Nationum Habitus, 1591, wood-
block print, printer of this version and original dimensions unknown. From a copy in the col-
The Allure of Artifice

Titian's *Portrait of a Young Woman* may also reference a second fantasy often explored in cultural depictions of courtesans. Aretino’s sonnets for *I modi* make repeated mention of women engaging in, and in fact being specifically desirous of, anal penetration. Lawner observes that Aretino, immersed in the world of courtesans, "dwells over and over on the possibility of alternating the natural and unnatural ways of making love with a woman. It is the choice that fascinates him, as well as the possibility of doing it both ways." In dressing the subject of *Portrait of a Young Woman* in a fur cloak and a hat that carry masculine gender associations, Titian may be offering this very choice to the viewer.

Although his study focuses on fifteenth-century Florence, it is worth noting Michael Rocke’s discussion of contemporary legal accounts that detail wives’ distress in response to their husbands’ intention to "use them from behind." Many of these accounts imply that this desire originated in the husband’s early sexual involvement with young men. Additionally, N.S. Davidson cites the record of an August 1500 Venetian trial that condemned a woman named Rada de Jadra to death for arranging anal sex between young female prostitutes and male clients. Although societal authorities condemned anal sex and in some cases strictly punished participants, it nonetheless clearly remained a desire actively pursued. Although many men had experienced male/male anal sex before their marriages, laws in both Florence and Venice technically prohibited such acts once they had become husbands. In Florence in particular, sexual relations between men, although illegal, were tolerated on a social level if they were pederastic in nature, with an older, unmarried man as the dominant participant. Judging by an emphasis on the act in erotic narratives associated with courtesans, it is possible that men may have visited courtesans specifically to engage in anal sex, although these women could not serve as direct substitutes for the young men with whom their clients may have engaged in this act in the past. However, through costume and play-acting, the courtesan could create the illusion that she could be either man or woman, or even both simultaneously. Titian, in his *Portrait of a Young Woman*, may allude to this fiction.

be a reference to an accommodation of a desire for anal sex, recalling Nanna’s words in Aretino’s *Ragionamenti* on the sexual proclivities of Venetians for “ass, and breast, and hard and soft things of fourteen or sixteen years, or at the most twenty years…” While her pearl jewelry denotes her female gender, the subject’s face is smooth and young, her chin sharp. Titian presents the subject in the midst of manipulating sumptuous props to conform to her companion’s desires. He eroticizes the subject’s interaction with the garments and accessories she employs, whether she is playfully dressing up as her companion, exploiting his garments to delay his access to her body, or adopting them to suggest that she can stand in for a boyish lover. She is putting on a show, using props to play-act for the pleasure of an implied male companion, namely the viewer. The enjoyment of her body, once it is stripped of all of its accoutrements, is the culmination of an elaborate fantasy, either that of the pleasurable deception of obscuring and then revealing her female parts or of the continuation of her charade as a boy.

Like the female characters in contemporary writings such as Aretino’s Sonnet 12 for *I modi*, the women of Titian’s half-lengths vacillate between various self-presentations, including identities as nymphs, goddesses, and even as boys. Reading Titian’s half-length, semi-nude figures through this lens of masquerade offers a solution for the problems posed by their ambiguous dress and gesture. These paintings exist in dialogue with a contemporary cultural acknowledgement of the courtesan’s appeal as a sexual chimera, as well as a related set of oft-articulated male fantasies. The prevalence of this courtesan-as-masquerader trope furthermore indicates that guises, mythological and otherwise, can be considered amplifications of eroticism rather than veils of propriety. It is possible, then, that Titian’s half-length images do not portray either a courtesan or an alternate identity assumed via elements of contemporary costume. Instead, they exemplify the cultural conception of the courtesan as embodying the potential to realize a multitude of erotic fantasies.
Appendix A

Transcription of “Sonetto 12” from a 1527 “counterfeit edition” of I modi most likely printed in Venice.81

[D.]—Marte, malatestissimo poltrone,
così sotto una donna non si reca,
e non si forte Venere a la ceca,
con assai furia e poca discrezione.

[U.]—Io non son Marte, io son Ercol Rangone,
e fotto voi che sete Angela Greca,
e s’io avessi qui la mia ribeca
vi suonerai fomentando una canzone;

e voi signora, mia dolce consorte,
su la porta ballar fareste il cazzo,
menando il culo e in su spingengo forte.

[D.]—Signor sì, che con voi fomentando sguazzo,
ma temo Amor che non mia dia la morte
con le vostre armi, essendo putto e pazzo.

[U.]—Cupido è mio ragazzo
e vostro figlio, e guarda l’arme mia
per sacrarle a la dea Poltronaria.

Notes

* This article developed from a project first undertaken in an art history graduate seminar entitled “The Renaissance at Home,” taught by Monika Schmitter at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I am grateful to Professor Schmitter for her support as I revised and expanded the article and prepared it for publication. I would also like to extend my thanks to the editors of Rutgers Art Review, whose thoughtful and productive questions and comments helped shape the final version.


Rona Goffen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 68.


8. First compiled in the 1540s, the letters were described in a later 1576 Venetian edition as “various and artful speeches, and humorous, philosophical conceits (varij & ingeniosi discorsi & fantastiche fantasie Filosofiche)” rather than as true correspondence. See Jennifer Neville, “Learning the Bassadanza from a Wolf; Andrea Calmo and Dance,” Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research 30, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 82. For a summary of what is known about Calmo, his background, and his involvement in early Commedia dell’Arte, see the introduction to Le lettere di Messer Antonio Calmo, riprodotte sulle stampe migliori, ed. Vittorio Rossi (Torino: E. Loescher, 1888), 4-15.


10. Lawner, Lives of the Courtesans, 64.

11. On plants traditionally associated with Venus, and which often appear as her attributes in Renaissance art, see Eve D’Ambra, Roman Women (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 176.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Although the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili is an allegorical account of a youth attempting to reclaim his lost love, it too is suffused with sensual details. On his quest, the hero wanders through a garden which is exceptionally similar to the one described by Calmo, containing “lilies and blooming Lysimachia and fragrant reeds and celery root and many other aquatic herbs and noble flowers…” (“lili convallii et la florente lysimachia et il odoroso calamo et la cedovaria, apio et di assai altre appretiate erbe acquicole et nobili fiori…”), Francesco Colonna, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, ed. Giovanni Pozzi and Lucia A. Ciapponi (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1968), 65. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations are those of the author of this article.


17. Ibid.


20. As Maria H. Loh recounts, scholars have suggested that Titian may also have been familiar with the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, a likely source for Calmo’s imagery. They have proposed in particular that the
illustration of the sleeping nymph in the *Hypnerotomachia* inspired the pose of Titian's *Sleeping Venus* and *Venus of Urbino*. See Maria H. Loh, *Titian Remade: Repetition and the Transformation of Early Italian Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 22-23.

21. For an example of Titian's blurring of contemporary and classicizing dress outside of the half-length genre, see his repainting of *Feast of the Gods* (1514/1529), now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

22. For an assessment of Titian's *Flora* and *Venus with a Mirror*, respectively, see Rona Goffen, *Titian's Women*, 72-75 and 133-139.


24. Lynne Lawner, *I Modi: The Sixteen Pleasures: An Erotic Album of the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 17. See also Luba Freedman, *Titian's Portraits Through Aretino's Lens* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 11. Although Freedman's book focuses on Aretino's letters to Titian's clients, missives that praised portraits the artist completed between 1537 and 1550, Titian would have been well aware of Aretino's reputation prior to this project and presumably knew of his involvement in the production of the second edition of *I modi*, especially if it was indeed published in Venice. Given that Titian began producing paintings for Federico Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, beginning in 1523, it is also possible that in his frequent visits to court he may have met or been exposed to the *I modi* controversy surrounding Giulio Romano, who lived and worked at the Mantuan court from 1524. See Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian: Mostly Iconographic* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 7.


27. Ibid., 40.


32. Ibid. Lynne Lawner writes that another of Aretino’s poems mentions that Greca later married Ercole Rangoni; however, as it is a satirical piece, it is uncertain whether the marriage did actually occur. See Lawner, *I Modi*, 86, note 12.

33. Lawner instead translates the Italian *ragazzo* as “servant.” Lawner, *I Modi*, 129. In translating the imagined exchange, Lawner also describes Rangoni as calling Greca his “lady and sweet wife.” In the original text, Aretino uses the Italian word *consorte*, which does not necessarily correspond to the English *wife*, and may function as a simple equivalent to the English word *consort*, referencing Mars’ traditional role as Venus’ lover. Talvacchia uses this alternate translation in her own examination of *I Modi*, treating the English “*consort*” as a direct equivalent to the term.

34 Lawner, *I Modi*, 82; 129.


36. The male voice is very complimentary toward the act and toward the female participant’s body. See Aretino,
“Sonnet 12,” in Talvacchia, Taking Positions, 82.

37. The woodcuts reproduced in Lawner’s book are taken from an early sixteenth-century copy of I Modi purchased by Walter Toscanini in Italy in 1928 and now held in another private collection. This particular volume is bound together with an additional set of fourteen postures and sixteen sonnets which appear not to be the work of Aretino, along with other erotic works, including two pertaining specifically to courtesans: Lorenzo Venier’s La puttana errante and Il trentuno della Zaffetta, Lawner, I Modi, 14. On the relationship of the images and text of I modi to the world of courtesans, see also Lawner, I Modi, 22.

38. Patricia Simons points out a well-known manifestation of this fantasy in another of Titian’s paintings, his Naples Danae (ca. 1545), painted for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese. Simons suggests that, as Cardinal Farnese viewed the painting in his camera propria, his visual access to this Danae’s body would allow Farnese to mentally play-act as Zeus. See Patricia Simons, “Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization,” in Language and Images of Renaissance Italy, ed. Alison Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 299.


40. Rona Goffen compares the attitude and dress of Titian’s Flora to an iteration of the same figure in Botticelli’s Primavera, thus connecting Titian’s work to an allegory of transformation from bride to wife. She further suggests that the gold ring on Flora’s right hand and her loose hair indicate her status as a bride. While these details can be construed as marks of such a status, they are just as likely the attributes of the courtesan. Goffen, Titian’s Women, 73-74.

41. Junkerman, ””Bellissima donna,”” 23.

42. Junkerman, ””Bellissima donna,”” 130.

43. Santore, ””Like a Nymph,”” Source: Notes in the History of Art 27, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 23.


46. Goffen, Titian’s Women, 72.

47. Santore, ””Like a Nymph,”” 20-26.

48. Santore, ””Like a Nymph,”” 20.


50. Goffen, Titian’s Women, 72.

51. Junkerman, ”””Bellissima donna,”” 24-25.


53. Santore, ””Julia Lombardo, Somtusoa Meretrice,”” 44.


55. Ferino-Pagden, ””Pictures of Women,”” 226.


60. Paulicelli, “From the Sacred to the Secular,” 48.


63. X-radiography has also shown that Titian’s original rendering of the subject of *Portrait of a Young Woman* was nearly identical to that of the roughly contemporaneous *Woman in a Fur Coat* (Figure 13); it appears that Titian merely altered the costume. Humfrey, *Titian*, 165.

64. Maria Loh has argued that Titian’s workshop routinely produced coveted “types” that were “customized and personalized... for subsequent users.” She cites as a specific example the Cardinal of Lorraine’s easy acceptance of a copy of a painting of “a woman” that was unavailable because it had been sold to another patron. Although it is impossible to say with certainty whether this was a painting of the half-length type, it seems that this genre was subject to the same business practice. Loh, *Titian Remade*, 42.

65. An additional piece of evidence that, during the Renaissance period, feathered hats were exclusively associated with masculine fashion is their appearance in early-seventeenth-century English engravings of the “Hic Mulier” or “Man-Woman.” Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass cite feathered hats as the defining attribute of this pictorial type. See Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80-82.


67. For a comparison in a contemporaneous Italian painting depicting a man and woman walking outdoors, see Nicholas Bollery, *Maria de’ Medici Accompanied by Grand Duke Ferdinando de’ Medici*, ca. 1613-14, oil on canvas, Cherbourg-Octeville, Musée Thomas Henry, as reproduced in Elizabeth Currie, *Fashion and Masculinity in Renaissance Florence* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 33. The man’s cloak is made of velvet lined with ermine, and is long and voluminous, so much so that it is carried behind him by an attendant. The female figure wears long sleeves and an overdress rather than a cloak.

68. Goffen considers the garment worn by Titian’s *Venus with a Mirror* (ca. 1555, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) as analogous to that worn by Giorgione’s *Laura*. Technical analysis of the *Venus with a Mirror* demonstrates that the artist reused a canvas on which he had previously painted a portrait of a contemporary couple. In converting it to a depiction of Venus, he retained the male half of the couple’s fur-lined cloak as the goddess’ drapery. Goffen suggests this is indicative both of economy and of Titian’s intention to suggest a male presence in the room that Venus occupies. Goffen, *Titian’s Women*, 137-138.


72. Patricia Simons has astutely highlighted the interactive quality of prints of this type, which treat the paper “as though it were cloth” and insinuate that “the manipulator [has] control over fictive and actual material alike.” Patricia Simons, “The Visual Dynamics of (Un)veiling in Early Modern Culture,” in *Visual Cultures of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Giancarlo Fiorenza, Timothy McCall, and Sean E. Roberts (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2013), 35.
73. Ibid.

74. Lawner suggests that several of the positions featured in Giulio Romano’s woodcuts are ambiguous and may represent anal sex; the text supports this conjecture in several instances. Primary among these examples is Sonnet 10, which begins with the line, “Io voglio in cul, tu mi perdonera!” (“I want it in the ass, forgive me!”) Sonnet 16 also appears to reference sodomy, as the female participant narrates, “Tu per a gambe in collo in cul me l’hai” (“You have me in the ass with my legs drawn up to my neck.”) Author’s translations from the original text printed in Lawner, *I Modi*, 78; 128; 90; 131. Because of the changeable nature of the contemporary definition of “sodomy” (*sodomia*), I have refrained from using the term to describe anal intercourse. Michael Rocke offers a comprehensive examination of the word and its Renaissance meanings, observing that religious authorities originally defined it as a sexual act between two people of the same gender. However, it was employed legally and socially to describe a set of acts which could not result in procreation, and which were thus considered to be contrary to natural sexual relations. See Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11. For an explanation of the use of the term in contemporary Venetian society, see N.S. Davidson, “Sodomy in Early Modern Venice,” in *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Tom Betteridge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 66.

75. Lawner, *I Modi*, 45. Sonnets 8, 11, and 14 indicate that that the male participant is interested in both types of intercourse. See Lawner, *I Modi*, 74; 80; 86.


78. Because male/male sexual acts were considered to have a negative impact on procreation and the creation of new families, Florentine religious and civil authorities spoke out against them. The Florentine municipal government took additional action via a dowry investment scheme, sponsorship of confraternities that allowed for non-sexual homosocial interactions, and the establishment of state-run brothels that made female prostitutes available. Adrian W.B. Randolph, “Homosocial Desire and Donatello’s Bronze David” in *Engaging Symbols: Gender, Politics, and Public Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 184.

