

# Amore e Virtù: Two Salvers Depicting Boccaccio's "Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine" in the Metropolitan Museum

PAUL F. WATSON

*Department of the History of Art, University of Pennsylvania*

VICTORIA KIRKHAM

*Department of Romance Languages, University of Pennsylvania*

IN THE new catalogue of Florentine paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Federico Zeri and Elizabeth Gardner convincingly argue that two birth salvers previously assigned to the limbo reserved for anonymous Florentines of the early quattrocento be given to the shop of Lorenzo di Niccolò (Figures 1, 2). Their attribution neatly resolves long-standing questions of authorship and dating.<sup>1</sup> It also suggests fruitful ways to decipher the subjects of the paintings and to understand their content.

The salvers are consistent with what is known of the artistic personality of Lorenzo di Niccolò. They range from Giottesque stolidity to aspirations after Gothic

grace to awkward attempts at action. A similar flavor, uneven but oddly appealing, distinguishes panel paintings attributed to Lorenzo di Niccolò. First recorded in 1392, he died between 1411 and 1422.<sup>2</sup> He seems to have specialized in painting altarpieces for the churches of Florence—two still survive in S. Croce—and for the towns of western Tuscany, including Prato and San Gimignano. His career was marked by artistic alliances with several masters of the late trecento, including Spinello Aretino and Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, who was Lorenzo's first partner and probably his teacher, though not his father as is commonly believed.<sup>3</sup>

Zeri and Gardner base their attribution of the salvers

1. Federico Zeri with the assistance of Elizabeth E. Gardner, *Italian Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Florentine School* (New York, 1971) pp. 54–56.

2. The basic studies are by Oswald Sirén: "Di alcuni pittori fiorentini che subirono l'influenza di Lorenzo Monaco," *L'Arte* 7 (1904) pp. 338–342; "Gli affreschi nel Paradiso degli Alberti: Lorenzo di Niccolò e Mariotto di Nardo," *L'Arte* 11 (1908) pp. 190–192; "Lorenzo di Niccolò," *Burlington Magazine* 36 (1920) pp. 72–78; and "Gerini, Lorenzo di Niccolò," *Thieme-Becker* XIII (1920) pp. 464–465. See also Raimond Van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting* 3 (The Hague, 1924) pp. 632–636.

3. Lorenzo's father, Niccolò di Martino, died sometime before 1402, according to the contract of 25 January 1401/02 for the high altarpiece of S. Marco, Florence, now in S. Domenico, Cortona; Gaetano Milanesi, *Nuovi documenti per la storia dell'arte toscana* (Florence, 1901) pp. 70–71. Lorenzo's true identity has been recognized by Sir Dominic Ellis Colnaghi, *A Dictionary of Florentine Painters*, ed. P. G. Konody and Selwyn Brinton (London, 1928) pp. 162–163; Renato Piattoli, "Un mercante del Trecento e gli artisti del tempo suo," *Rivista d'arte* 11 (1929) pp. 563–564, note 5, and p. 565, note 2; and Bruce Cole, "A New Work by the Master of the Arte della Lana Coronation," *Burlington Magazine* 110 (1968) p. 215, note 9.



FIGURE 1

Lorenzo di Niccolò, Episodes from the *Comedia delle Ninfe Fioretine*, about 1406. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 26.287.2

to Lorenzo di Niccolò on a polyptych in S. Croce (Figure 3). The stylistic kinship between the paintings in Florence and New York is evident. Some of the women in Figure 1 have the same sloping heads and long straight noses as the music-making angels who witness the coronation of the Virgin: a man and a woman in

Figure 2 share the firm profile of the Virgin herself; in both salvers women stare out at the viewer in the same grave fashion as Saint Lucy in the altarpiece. The panel in S. Croce suggests something of Lorenzo's abrupt variations in type and quality.<sup>4</sup> Most important,

4. Zeri and Gardner, p. 55. Another useful parallel lies in the predella to Lorenzo's Coronation of the Virgin, in Cortona, see Note 3. The salvers resemble the central panel, an Epiphany, in several individual figures, the types of the dogs, and the movements. A photograph is in *L'Arte* 11 (1908) p. 194.



FIGURE 2

Lorenzo di Niccolò, *An Eclogue from the Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 26.287.<sup>1</sup>

the altarpiece helps to date the salvers because it is dated by inscription 1410, toward the end of Lorenzo di Niccolò's recorded activity.<sup>5</sup>

Other evidence favors an early dating. The tight-fitting, high-necked costumes worn by one or two figures in the salvers follow a fashion popular during the

first decade of the quattrocento. Perhaps the best-known contemporary instance is the gown worn by Ilaria del Carretto in her funerary effigy, which was

5. On the front steps of the throne in the central panel is the inscription MCCCCX. The date was correctly noted by Crowe and Cavalcaselle in 1864, who also gave the altarpiece to Lorenzo. The erroneous date of 1408 appears in Sirén's article in *Thieme-Becker*, p. 465. We are indebted to Gino Corti, who examined the Coronation of the Virgin at the restoration institute in the Fortezza del Basso, Florence, and confirmed the date of 1410.



FIGURE 3  
Lorenzo di Niccolò, Coronation of the Virgin,  
1410. S. Croce, Florence (photo: Alinari)

carved in Lucca by Jacopo della Quercia around 1406.<sup>6</sup>

Heraldic research indicates that the right-hand escutcheon in Figure 2, a wolf ascending a mountain, belongs to a Pisan family, Di Lupo Parra.<sup>7</sup> Their arms occupy the position in heraldry customarily reserved for the bride in a marriage alliance. It may be assumed, therefore, that the salvers were commissioned by the Lupo family sometime after Pisa was acquired by Florence in 1406.<sup>8</sup>

Dating the paintings around 1410 helps to clarify the nature of the scenes Lorenzo di Niccolò depicted. It is usually believed, and sometimes rapturously proclaimed, that the paintings celebrate the joys of life in the country, and that Figure 1 represents a hunting scene, Figure 2 a rustic concert. But genre scenes in

6. Photographs are in Charles Seymour, Jr., *Jacopo della Quercia, Sculptor* (New Haven, 1973), pls. 10–14. In a fresco depicting the nuptials of St. Cecilia, in the sacristy of S. Maria del Carmine, Florence, servingmen wear costumes like that sported by the youth in Figure 2. The frescoes are dated shortly after 1394 by Walter and Elizabeth Paatz, *Die Kirchen von Florenz III* (Frankfort am Main, 1952) pp. 210, 272, note 122.

7. Vittorio Spredi, ed., *Enciclopedia storico-nobiliare italiana IX* (1931) p. 180. The field of the Lupo Parra device, however, is gold, not black as on the salver. Examination of the salver reveals that the black pigment is much abraded, particularly toward the left of the wolf, and that it does not seem to be the same as the well-preserved black pigment used for the shepherds. It is possible that Lorenzo used an unstable yellow pigment as a substitute for gold, such as orpiment, which turns black when exposed to air. See Cennino Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook*, tr. and ed. Daniel V. Thompson (New Haven, 1933) pp. 28–29, and Daniel V. Thompson, *The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting* (New York, 1956) pp. 176–178.

8. The other escutcheon resembles the arms of a Florentine family, Da Fortuna; Luigi Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze II* (Florence, 1869) pl. ix; G. B. di Crollanza, *Dizionario storico blasonico I* (Bologna, 1886) p. 425. The chief difficulty, however, is that the



contemporary secular art do not resemble the events shown here. An instructive instance is the hunting scene adorning the so-called guest room of the Palazzo Datini in Prato, frescoed in 1409, in which the hunters are nondescript, their prey includes many varieties of animals, and the chase has neither beginning nor end.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, genre scenes are rare in Florentine cassone painting at the beginning of the fifteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

The costumes of the salvers show that Lorenzo di Niccolò painted a narrative. Prominent in Figure 2 is a curly-headed young man, wearing a high-necked red tunic over a jerkin and hose of green. The same blond youth strides across the right foreground of Figure 1 as a hunter carrying his quarry on a stick and displaying a knotty club. He appears twice more in the background scenes. Turned toward the viewer in Figure 2 is a comely blond maiden dressed in a loose low-necked gown of pinkish purple. A similar figure looks outward from Figure 1. She stands barefoot in the left foreground, wearing a pink gown over a gray tunic, and holding an arrow and a bow. Her prey, a brace of brown beasts smeared with blood, lies in the tall grass at her feet. The women are huntresses whose costumes, loosely cut and girdled twice in an antique fashion, are those of sylvan nymphs, such as Diana and her followers.<sup>11</sup> The salvers, therefore, form a narrative continuous in Figure 1, unitary in Figure 2. The story concerns a hunter who shares with a band of huntresses their pastimes, including a chase and a concert.

It is our contention that Lorenzo di Niccolò depicted events from the *Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine*, an amatory allegory written around 1342 by Giovanni Boccaccio. The hero, Ameto, is a youthful hunter dwelling in

primitive Tuscany who discovers by chance a band of nymphs who teach him the ways of love. The *Comedia*'s narrative structure, expositions in elaborate prose interrupted at key points by song, reflects Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Like these models it ultimately is a discourse on the virtuous life.<sup>12</sup> The story, structure, and aims of Boccaccio's book all find expression in Lorenzo's salvers.

Perhaps the best way to prove our identification is to let Boccaccio tell the tale of Ameto and the nymphs. In the woods by the steep banks of the river Mugnone lived Ameto, a simple lad whose closest companions were fauns and dryads, natives of that place, whom he honored with sacrifices. Ameto was a mighty hunter:

And rare were those [timid beasts] that his eye discerned which, owing to his swiftness in running and clever tracking, were not wounded by his bow or cornered by his dogs or ultimately vanquished by his snares; and once they had become tangled in his nets he quickly overtook them; thus it was that he often returned to his dwelling laden with prey.<sup>13</sup>

But once, after an unusually rewarding day of hunting, as he was heading homeward through a pleasant plain near the spot where the Mugnone flows into the Arno, he stopped to rest beneath a lofty oak. Idleness was succeeded by frolic when Ameto, newly refreshed, began to play and cavort with his dogs:

But while he was enjoying himself in this unusual manner, as the sun was very hot, suddenly from the nearby shore there came to his ears a charming voice raised in a song never before heard.<sup>14</sup>

Fortuna greyhound bears no sword. The suggestion made by Paul Schubring, "Two New 'Deschi' in the Metropolitan Museum," *Apollo* 6 (1927) p. 107, that the left-hand shield is that of the Canigiani is not correct; A. M. G. Scorza, *Enciclopedia araldica italiana* VII (Genoa, n.d.) p. 85.

9. Bruce Cole, "The Interior Decoration of the Palazzo Datini in Prato," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz* 13 (1967) pp. 76–80, figs. 17–20; the frescoes are by Arrigo di Niccolò. Lorenzo di Niccolò's work at the Palazzo Datini is discussed by Piattoli, pp. 563–567.

10. Apart from scenes of childbirth, such as the painting illustrated in our Figure 6, the only genre scenes in Florentine cassone painting before 1430 are three panels now attributed to Giovanni Toscani; Paul Schubring, *Cassoni*, 2nd. ed. (Leipzig, 1923) pls. c., no. 427; ix, no. 24; cxci, no. 904.

11. Costumes similar to those worn by the women in Lorenzo's

salvers are worn by Diana and her nymphs in a manuscript of Boccaccio's *Ninfale Fiesolano* illustrated early in the 1420s; Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, Ms. B.R.47 (II.II.66), see Bernhard Degenhart and Annegrit Schmitt, *Corpus der italienischen Zeichnungen 1300–1450: Süd- und Mittelitalien* IV (Berlin, 1968) pl. 211a. Similar costumes appear in a cassone panel of the same subject painted in Florence around 1430; Paul F. Watson, "Boccaccio's *Ninfale Fiesolano* in Early Florentine Cassone Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 34 (1971) pp. 331–333, pls. 55a, b.

12. The text from which we quote and upon which our translations are based is edited by Antonio Enzo Quaglio in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, II (Milan, 1967). A good recent introduction to the *Comedia* is in Carlo Muscetta, *Giovanni Boccaccio* (Bari, 1972) pp. 99–107.

13. *Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine* III, 5.

14. *Comedia* III, 9.

It filled Ameto with wonder and caused him to conclude that the gods had come down to earth. Ameto reasoned:

They, being wearied by the heat like me, are pausing near here, and are partaking of celestial delights, perhaps reviling the worldly ones with their voices. Never have I seen a single god, and being desirous to see if they are as beautiful as people say, now I shall go and see them, guided in my steps by the sun; and in order that they may be benevolent to me, if I see them bereft of prey I shall make them bountiful with mine, should it please them.<sup>15</sup>

After subduing and tying his noisy dogs Ameto, carrying his heavy load on a knotty club slung over his shoulder, set off in the direction of the sweet tune. And

as soon as he came upon the clear waters of the little stream, in the shadows of a pleasant thicket amongst the flowers and deep grass upon the clear shore he saw a group of young women; some, displaying their white feet in the shallow ripples, were slowly wading through them this way and that; others, who had laid down their sylvan bows and arrows, held their hot faces suspended above the stream, and having tucked up their sleeves, were renewing their beauty with their fair hands and the cool waters; and some, having loosened their clothing to let in the breezes, were sitting attentive to what one of them, more joyous than the others, sat singing; it was from her, he realized, that the song before had come to his ears. The moment he saw them, imagining that they must be goddesses, he drew back timidly, fell to his knees, and stricken with awe, knew not what he should say.<sup>16</sup>

Ameto's silent discovery of the nymphs soon created a flurry of activity:

The recumbent dogs of the resting nymphs, aroused by the sight of him and thinking perhaps that he was a wild beast, quickly fell on him with loud baying. And since flight availed him not, once they had overtaken him, as best he could, with his club, with his hands, with retreat, and with rough words, he tried to ward off their bites; but as such words were unfamiliar to ears accustomed to receiving womanly sounds, the dogs followed him more fiercely, and he, who was by then more dead than alive from fright, recalling Actaeon, searched with

his hands for the antlers on his forehead, cursing himself for having had the audacity to want to look upon holy goddesses. The nymphs, however, whose recreation had been disturbed by canine fury, arose and with loud voices managed to subdue their swift dogs; then with pleasant laughter, having recognized his true nature, they consoled and reassured him; and once they had returned to their place, after happily welcoming Ameto, the singer thus began again her song.<sup>17</sup>

This nymph is called Lia, and her lyric is a celebration of selfless love. Ameto is so rustic that he does not understand what god this "Amore" is, but he is human enough to feel the stirrings of a new passion. The hot day comes to an end, the nymphs disperse, and Ameto departs, "bound with a new chain."<sup>18</sup>

The foreground episodes of the hunting scene (Figure 1) represent Ameto's discovery of the nymphs. The red-clad youth striding toward a stream is Ameto, identified by his prey slung over his shoulder, and especially by the club, Boccaccio's "rozzo bastone." Above and behind this figure is a rocky slope, almost chocolate in color, where several white dogs sleep under a tree. In front of them another blond youth in a red tunic with green undersleeves peers over a ridge. Since he, too, bears a heavy load slung over a stick, he must be Ameto searching for the source of the sweet tune. On the river bank are the nymphs. In the foreground two women, dressed alike in robes of a *changeant* yellow and pink, refresh themselves in the green ripples. One splashes water at her companion, who washes a foot with one hand and tugs idly at her hair with the other, as if to renew her beauty with fair hands and cool waters. In a flowery meadow to the left sits a cluster of nymphs in pink, gray, and green, attentive to one, perhaps more joyous than the others, whose mouth is opened in song. She is Lia. Like Ameto, she is dressed in red.

The narrative that Lorenzo di Niccolò painted is not only continuous but also simultaneous. Beside Lia and her three companions are their hunting dogs, as Boccaccio specified. One sleeps as the other stirs, sniffing the air. On the barren side of the stream three more dogs snarl and bark at Ameto who stiffly wards them off with his club. The canine fury is quelled by two nymphs who waded through the Mugnone. One, dressed

15. *Comedia* III, 11.

16. *Comedia* III, 13–17.

17. *Comedia* III, 17–19.

18. *Comedia* VI, 1.

in a scarlet gown with green sleeves, is again Lia; her companion wears gray. The nymph in gray beats a hound with a switch while Lia orders the others, with firm gestures of command, to desist.

Behind these scenes of encounter another event unfolds. Ameto's curly locks and red tunic appear again at the extreme left in a valley tucked behind the garden where Lia sings. Here he has joined five nymphs who hunt over steep brown and gray slopes. Lia appears for a third time as the nymph who rams her hunting spear into the breast of a black boar. This episode is based on Chapter VI of the *Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine*. After listening to Lia's song, Ameto returns home where

he consumes all his time thinking only of the beautiful nymph; the nights that formerly had seemed brief after the heavy labors undertaken by Ameto in the high woods are now deemed exceedingly long because of his fiery desires. Pressed by cares that are new to him, Ameto curses the shadows for being too long, and as soon as the light enters his wakeful eyes, he arises to search the forest with his dogs; and there he either goes about seeking the beautiful nymphs, or finds or awaits them, and once he has found them again, he happily follows them in the hunts they have begun; and with his mind intent on the things he knows will please them, he eagerly serves them; no task seems burdensome to him, no danger causes him to be afraid. Having almost become swifter than his dogs, whenever Lia is watching him, he himself takes the fiercest animals single-handedly.<sup>19</sup>

As Boccaccio implies, the chase served to educate Ameto further in the ways of love.

While resting with them in the hot hours in cool meadows beneath welcome shadows alongside the clear bank of the little stream, he feels supreme consolation of mind and is pleased with himself for having been daring, because he finds that all of the nymphs have befriended him and that he is especially dear to Lia.<sup>20</sup>

The second salver illustrates another key moment in Ameto's amatory education. After the hot summer comes a winter of unprecedented severity, relieved finally by a verdant spring. On the feast day of Venus, when all the people of Tuscany rejoice, Ameto meets Lia, who takes him to a secluded part of the forest where four more nymphs assemble, garbed in a variety of costume and all extraordinarily beautiful. The com-

pany is entertained by Teogapen, a shepherd, who sings to Ameto and the nymphs. He introduces two more shepherds, Alcesto of Arcadia and Acaten of Academia, who engage in a musical competition. Acaten sings of the pleasures of wealth and ease, Alcesto of the virtues of a frugal and industrious life. Their contest is the theme of the so-called rustic concert (Figure 2). Ameto sits between two nymphs, who listen to a shepherd playing on a pipe, to whom a second rustic defers. Since the latter wears a bulging wallet, he must be Acaten of Academia, who boasts to the nymphs:

I do not care, while keeping watch, to linger or to play the pipe . . . nor does it matter to me if they [my sheep] do not immediately obey my voice at all, as long as I can use them to stuff my purse and throat.<sup>21</sup>

The piper is Alcesto. Like the first salver, this panel presents a simultaneous narrative. Ameto and a nymph point to Alcesto, indicating that he has won the contest.

Alcesto had finished speaking, and Acaten, being angered, was about to answer, when the women, almost in unison, bade him be silent and rebuking him for his error, gave the promised garlands to the victor.<sup>22</sup>

After the competition Ameto and the nymphs retire to a meadow shaded by a laurel tree where two more huntresses join them. The ladies sit in a circle and tell Ameto what love is. These are no ordinary nymphs; some who have been married, for example, entertain the hunter with tales of their extramarital affairs. When the nymphs finish, Venus herself appears. The women then transform Ameto from an ignorant rustic into a rational man. In his new state of enlightenment Ameto realizes that the nymphs are really the virtues; chief among them is Lia, who represents Faith. Ameto's understanding flows from the goddess of love, "not that Venus which foolish folk call goddess of their disordered concupiscence, but the one from whom true and just and holy loves descend among mortals."<sup>23</sup>

It may seem strange that Lorenzo di Niccolò or his patrons chose to represent events leading up to the

19. *Comedia* VI, 1–3.

20. *Comedia* VI, 4.

21. *Comedia* XIV, 67–72.

22. *Comedia* XV, 1.

23. *Comedia* XLII, 1.



FIGURE 4  
Page from a model book, about 1350. Tuscan (?).  
Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, II, fol. 12<sup>r</sup>  
(photo: Pierpont Morgan Library)

amatory symposium, rather than the symposium itself, which occupies much of Boccaccio's book, or the epiphany of Venus.<sup>24</sup> The painter's selection, however, is justified by the poet's text. Purified, Ameto reflects on the changes in his life:

Making an inner comparison between his primitive life and the present one, he recalls what he was with scorn, and reviles the way he wasted himself along with his time by hunting through the woods among the fauns and the satyrs. And here the fear that he had rightfully felt on account of the women's dogs brings terror to his mind again; next he laughs at himself for having dared desire that laudable love, and with serene insight truly

understands the first song he heard, the one by his Lia. Then he realizes with a supreme sense of reward how much the shepherd's songs, which had only delighted his ear, may profit the heart. Similarly, he sees what the nymphs are, they who had been more pleasing to his eye than to his intellect and who are now more pleasing to his intellect than to his eye . . . and in short, it seems to him that he has been made from a brute animal into a man.<sup>25</sup>

Our identification raises several new problems, including Lorenzo di Niccolò's detailed treatment of the encounter in the first salver and the seemingly casual representation of the eclogue in the second. It becomes necessary to understand how the painter coped with the complicated text that his patron assigned him. Since no other illustrations of the *Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine* are known, it is probable that Lorenzo had no familiar iconographic patterns to rely on, as he had in the case of the altarpiece of 1410. He must have fallen back on a wide array of pictorial formulas. The hunting scenes of the first salver, for example, were adapted from common model-book patterns. An instructive instance is a leaf from an album produced in Tuscany around 1350 (Figure 4), in which a chase after rabbits and deer fleeing over rocky ridges spreads across the pictorial surface in a manner that anticipates Lorenzo's chase.<sup>26</sup> Another precedent appears in a fresco in S. Croce painted around 1400 and variously attributed to Lorenzo's partners, Spinello Aretino and Niccolò di Pietro Gerini (Figure 5).<sup>27</sup> Here the convention of a background figure peeping over a boulder to witness

24. In contrast to the salvers is the incipit page of British Museum Add. Ms. 10, 299, a *Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine* copied in Milan around 1440. A badly damaged initial depicts Ameto standing before the seven nymphs, who sit in a flowery meadow shaded by trees. This is the only scene in the manuscript, though portraits of four of the nymphs adorn the text. See *List of Additions to the Manuscripts in the British Museum in the Years MDCCCXXXVI–MDCCCXL* (London, 1843), p. 98.

25. *Comedia XLVI*, 2–5.

26. The model book is dated around 1350 and given to a central Italian draughtsman by R. W. Scheller, *A Survey of Medieval Model Books* (Haarlem, 1963) pp. 137–142. A hunting scene like those of the pattern book and the first salver is in a fresco depicting a miracle of St. Benedict in the sacristy of S. Miniato al Monte, Florence. It was painted by Spinello Aretino, one of Lorenzo di Niccolò's partners, around 1387; Paatz, *Kirchen von Florenz IV*, pp. 236–237.

27. The fresco is usually dated around 1400; summary of opinion in Paatz, *Kirchen von Florenz I*, pp. 563, 654–655, note 336.



FIGURE 5 Spinello Aretino, Christ Led to Calvary, S. Croce, Florence (photo: Alinari)



Christ lead to Calvary may have served as a model for Ameto's first appearance when he searches for "the gods."

Sometimes Lorenzo di Niccolò seems to ignore Boccaccio's text. Although Ameto is characterized as a prodigious hunter unafraid of the fiercest beasts, in the first salver he brings to the nymphs only a pair of harmless rabbits.<sup>28</sup> Further inspection reveals a preponderance of rabbits in primitive Tuscany. In the chase Ameto holloas after a hare, while the admonitory nymph standing beside the stream has a brace of them at her feet. Even in the shepherds' contest rabbits lurk. Two crouch at piping Alcesto's feet; another pair, less clearly leporine, peers over the cliff behind him. However, Lorenzo di Niccolò's preoccupation with rabbits can easily be explained, because they pertain to Venus, the goddess of love—and thus telegraph the symbolic import of Boccaccio's text.<sup>29</sup>

Another purposeful departure from the literary narrative is the figure of Ameto himself. Boccaccio describes his hero as a bearded rustic whose attire is shabby, torn, and dirty.<sup>30</sup> Lorenzo transforms him into a Florentine dandy. In so doing the painter makes him into a contemporary figure, unlike the nymphs, so that Ameto becomes a surrogate for the bridegroom whose arms appear on the second salver.<sup>31</sup> Presumably the youth to whom these paintings belonged would be encouraged to follow Ameto's example and seek out a virtuous love consistent with the marriage bond. The idea of love appears in an even more obvious fashion, because Ameto and his beloved Lia are in red, the hue of "fiery desires," in the quattrocento the color of love both sacred and profane.<sup>32</sup>



FIGURE 6

Bartolomeo di Fruosino, salver: Scene of Birth, 1428. New-York Historical Society, New York (photo: courtesy the New-York Historical Society)

The landscape settings of the salvers reflect a similar concern for literal representation combined with symbolic allusion. In the initial painting, a wilderness of mountains gives way to a distant view of coastal plain, green sea, and cloud-filled sky. The background shows

28. In the *Comedia* (VIII, 98–100), Ameto begs Lia to leave off her hunting and join him in a shady meadow, promising that when she comes, he will give her "due leprezzini/pur testé tolti alla madre piagata/dall'arco mio." However, he tempts her with many other offerings of animals, all of which were meant to be delivered alive.

29. In a coffer painted in Siena in 1421, rabbits are associated with Venus; Frank J. Mather, "A Quattrocento Toilet Box in the Louvre," *Art in America* 11, 1 (December 1921) pp. 45–51. The association goes back to Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X, 538. Leporine symbolism plays an important part in illuminated manuscripts of the *Comedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine*. Rabbits are in the borders of folio 2<sup>r</sup> of Ms. Ital. 1106 in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, which was produced in 1431; G. Mazzatinti, *Inventario dei manoscritti italiani delle biblioteche di Francia* 1 (Rome, 1886) p. 190. Rabbits also abound in the borders of the incipit page of British Museum Add.

Ms. 10, 298, produced in 1460, described briefly in *List of Additions* (1843) p. 28.

30. *Comedia* III, 8; V, 1; V, 21.

31. The red-clad figure whom we identify as Ameto was called a bridegroom by Schubring, p. 107, and Bryson Burroughs, "Two Italian Marriage Salvers," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (1927) p. 121. The marital implications of the panels were also stressed by Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (London, 1948) p. 365. It is amusing to note that Ameto's sleeping dogs in Figure 1 are white and have dark green collars, like the heraldic dog in the husband's coat-of-arms in Figure 2.

32. Charity, designed in 1470 by Antonio Pollaiuolo and executed by his brother Piero (Uffizi, Florence), wears a red gown. Scarlet is the dress of Luxury in the Exaltation of St. Francis painted between 1437 and 1444 by Sassetta (Berenson Coll., I

signs of civilization: sailing ships, castles with towers, tiny walled towns. Tapestrylike panoramas of this sort can often be found in cassone painting of the early quattrocento, for example (Figure 6); but in Lorenzo's salver the landscape probably served the purposes of the literary text. Its features coincide remarkably well with the panorama that Boccaccio describes in Chapter III of the *Comedia*:

In Italy, the special splendor of worldly realms, there abides Etruria, its chief member, as I believe, and singular beauty . . . rich in cities, full of noble peoples, adorned with infinite castles, made delightful by charming country towns, and abounding in fruitful fields.<sup>33</sup>

Though Lorenzo's fields can hardly be called fruitful, the background shows white and gray *castella*, or fortified settlements, and gray, white, and red *ville*, or small country towns. The civilized aspects of Tuscany agreeably frame its sylvan ones, represented by the river Mugnone in the foreground.

Less directly dependent on the text, and more overtly

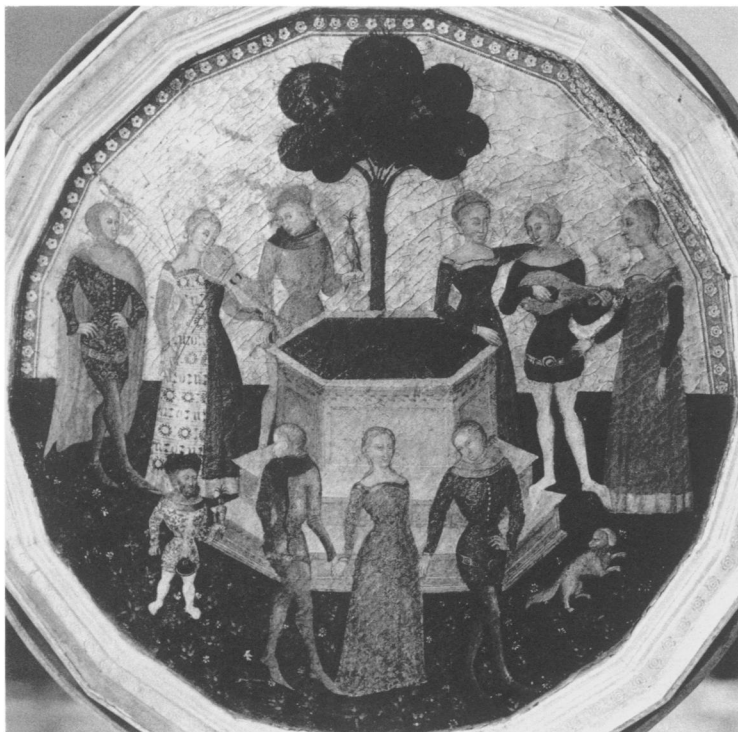
symbolic, is the setting of the foreground episodes. Boccaccio describes the place where Ameto first sees the nymphs as a meadow beside a stream. Lorenzo provides a meadow softened by tufts of grass and weedy plants, enlivened by tiny red flowers, and watered by an elaborate fountain. The landscape is of a familiar iconographic type—the Garden of Love. A charming Florentine salver painted in the 1370s depicts the Garden of Love in a manner very close to that of our salver (Figure 7).<sup>34</sup> The world here consists of a flowery meadow, a shady tree, and a fountain, “une sorte de rêve du pays d’amour,” to cite Raimond Van Marle's apt formulation.<sup>35</sup> In Lia's place of repose, as in the Garden of Love, music is a governing motif. Her nymphs recline in amorous attitudes: one plucks flowers, a second toys with a dog, a third is embraced by the singer herself. Lorenzo uses the Garden of Love to epitomize the fate awaiting Ameto.

The garden also accords well with the sweet tune Lia sings, in which she describes herself as a generous woman well versed in the arts of love:

I have dominion over this place, far more worthy of my beauty than any other, as I am kindled with that fire which burns all of Mount Cytherea, and it moves me to be joyfully merry, and to serve the amorous goddess.<sup>36</sup>

FIGURE 7

Garden of Love, about 1375. Florentine. Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai (photo: Musée de la Chartreuse)



Tatti); Enzo Carli. *Sassetta e il Maestro dell'Osservanza* (Milan, 1957) pl. xxi.

33. *Comedia* III, 1.

34. The panel is usually assigned to a Florentine follower of Giotto active in the trecento: *Catalogue des ouvrages . . . legués au Musée de Douai par M. Amadée Fouques de Wagonville* (Douai, 1877) p. 7; Umberto Gnoli, “L’arte italiana in alcune gallerie francesi di provincia. Note di viaggio,” *Rassegna d’arte* 8 (1908) p. 157; Pierre Bautier, “Le opere d’arte italiana nella Francia invasa,” *Rassegna d’arte* 19 (1919) pp. 157–158; S. Leroy, *Catalogue des peintures . . . dans les galeries du Musée de Douai* (Douai, 1937) p. 9. According to the records of the Frick Art Reference Library, Richard Offner orally attributed the panel to a follower of Nardo and Jacopo di Cione.

35. Raimond Van Marle, *Iconographie de l’art profane* II (The Hague, 1932) pp. 426–431, cites our Figure 1 as a prime instance of the type. The significance of the fountain and lawn were recognized also by Lionello Venturi, *The Rabinowitz Collection* (New York, 1932) p. 20. Once more Lorenzo di Niccolò seems to have set a precedent for illuminators to follow: flowery meadows appear in the borders adorning the incipit pages of two manuscripts of the *Comedia*, Ms. Ital. 1106, dated 1431, in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and British Museum Add. Ms. 10, 298, made in 1460. Both are cited in Note 29, above.

36. *Comedia* IV, 62–67.



FIGURE 8  
Diana and Actaeon, detail of a cassone. Florentine. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George Blumenthal, 41.190.129

The flowery meadow where Lia sits may be interpreted, therefore, as a symbol of her ardent devotion to the cause of love.

Lia's song also explains a puzzling detail of the first salver. Two of her nymphs seem to take an inordinate interest in the fountain beside her garden. One garbed in gray crouches awkwardly to peer up at its topmost basin, as if to see rainbows in the splashing water. This nymph is the same as the girl who runs with Lia across the river to succor Ameto. Standing behind the fountain is a blond nymph clad all in red, who appears also in the hunting scene. She gently caresses the still water of the lowest basin in an act of pure narcissism. Actually, Lia says that her brother was none other than Narcissus, the hunter who fell fatally in love with his own reflected image.

A second mythological allusion brings out the significance of the first. One of the nymphs crouching beside the stream leans forward to splash her companion, who washes herself. Her act recalls a famous aquatic gesture with dire consequences, seen on a cassone painted quite early in the quattrocento by an unknown Florentine (Figure 8).<sup>37</sup> Diana splashes Actaeon:

So raught she water in hir hande and for to wreake  
the spight  
Besprinkled all the hands and face of this unluckie  
knight.<sup>38</sup>

The splashing nymph emulates Diana, but without malice. The allusion is delightfully appropriate, because when the dogs attack Ameto he fears that he will suffer unlucky Actaeon's transformation. The painter turns Diana's angry gesture into a harmless one to indicate that these nymphs pursue love, not chastity, in their pleasant garden. In similar fashion, the narcissistic gesture may suggest the distinction between ignoble and noble love. What emerges in Lorenzo's painting is a subtle pattern of allusions, giving visual formulation to the complicated doctrines of Boccaccio's *Comedia*.<sup>39</sup>

Lia's garden also corresponds closely to the place Boccaccio describes in Chapter XV, a "meadow, beneath a most beautiful laurel, filled with blossoms, beside a clear fountain,"<sup>40</sup> where the nymphs discourse on love and where Ameto is transformed. Though it would be rash to insist on the painter's botanical skills, the little tree above Lia does possess long laurel-like leaves.<sup>41</sup> The landscape literally serves as the stage for Ameto's introduction to love.

The marble fountain, which Lorenzo makes so prominent, may also symbolize Ameto's ultimate fate.

37. Zeri and Gardner, pp. 73–74. The inscription reads "Como Diana fece diventare/Cervio Antheon."

38. *Metamorphoses* III, 189–190.

39. It is possible that the boar being killed in the background forms part of the pattern of allusion. In Ovid's account of the Calydonian boar hunt, the beast is sent by Diana (*Metamorphoses* VIII, 271–283). Perhaps more attuned to the purposes of the *Comedia*, however, is an early quattrocento tradition that boars symbolize vice; Anna Spychalska-Boczkowska, "Diana with Meleagros and Actaeon. Some Remarks on a XV Century Italian Cassone," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 9, 2 (1968) pp. 29–36. In Sassetta's Exaltation of St. Francis, mentioned in Note 32, the boar is an attribute of Luxury. If Lorenzo di Niccolò intended a similar connotation here, Lia's dispatch of the boar implies the triumph of noble over ignoble love.

40. *Comedia* XV, 2. The text implies that the symposium takes place in a different part of the meadow described in *Comedia* III, when Ameto encounters the nymphs.

41. Three types of trees are shown: an unknown species made up of circular clusters of leaves; a tree with clumps of four broad leaves, like those of an oak; and the laurel-like species above Lia. All three appear in more developed form in a Resurrection frescoed around 1400 by Lorenzo's partner, Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, in the sacristy of S. Croce near the Way to Calvary (Figure 5).



FIGURE 9  
Giovanni del Biondo, Baptism, around 1370, detail of an altarpiece. Jarves Collection, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven (photo: Yale University Art Gallery)

When Venus descended to enlighten him, the nymphs stripped off his coarse clothes, and immersed him in the clear fountain. From it Ameto emerged transformed. It is no accident that the hexagonal basin in the first salver and the centerpiece of the Garden of Love (Figure 7) resemble a baptismal font.<sup>42</sup> A similar font appears in an altarpiece painted by Giovanni del Biondo around 1370 (Figure 9). The inscription accompanying this allegory of Baptism, “*Ecce nova facio*,” might apply equally well to the concluding events of the *Comedia delle Ninfe* itself.<sup>43</sup> The familiarity of this image in the late trecento is proven by the fresco illustrated in Figure 5, where a baptismal font appears in the right

42. It anticipates the design of the baptismal font in S. Giovanni, Siena; in Seymour, pl. 61.

43. The inscription is from Rev. 21:5. See Richard Offner and Klara Steinweg, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting* (New York, 1967) sect. 4, vol. IV, p. ix, note 56, pp. 84–85. Offner and Steinweg date the panel around 1367. A dating around 1370 is proposed by Charles Seymour, Jr., *Early Italian Paintings in the Yale University Art Gallery* (New Haven, 1970) pp. 43–45.

44. The wellhead is not an empty tomb as suggested by Spychalska-Boczkowska, p. 32. Wellheads symbolize wilderness in the

border. Allusions to the rite of baptism not only enrich the significance of Boccaccio’s text, they also suit perfectly the purposes of a birth salver, a *desco di donna da parto*.

Contrasting with the varied landscapes of the first salver is the stony setting of the second. A simple well-head filled with green water defines the locale as a rustic wilderness.<sup>44</sup> Ameto and the nymphs listen to the shepherds’ songs amid brown and tan rocks, whose severity is relieved only by tiny flowers, straggling plants, and diminutive laurels and oaks. Here Lorenzo parts company with Boccaccio, who specifies that the eclogue was staged in “a most beautiful meadow, lush with grass and flowers, sheltered by many branches covered with new leaves, beside a clear fountain.”<sup>45</sup> This is not the least of the liberties taken with the text. Two nymphs accompany Ameto, not five; Teogapen, the master of ceremonies, is nowhere to be seen; and the painter ignores the elaborate descriptions of nymphaean costume and coiffure to which Boccaccio devotes considerable space.<sup>46</sup>

But in a way the second panel does justice to the significance of the musical competition. Its landscape setting is the austere world that the victor, Alcesto of Arcadia, celebrates in his song—high mountains, where only tufts of grass grow amid the rocks, and clear fountains are carved from the stone.<sup>47</sup> Just as the garden in the first salver symbolizes Ameto’s discovery of love, so the mountains here allude to Alcesto’s victory over Acaten.

The solemnity of the eclogue is further underlined by the figures’ simple gestures. The nymph turned toward the viewer soberly indicates the victor. The second nymph, clad in a high-necked green gown, touches her breast in a pose of wonder and awe that is usually found in religious narratives of the utmost solemnity. An instructive instance is a small panel painted by Jacopo di Cione (Figure 9) in which five

illustration of Boccaccio’s *Ninfale Fiesolano* cited in Note 11, and in the episode of the sacrifice of Isaac in the Abraham relief of Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise.

45. *Comedia* IX, 11. The upper portion of the panel near the escutcheons and the border has been repainted.

46. Lorenzo’s practice contrasts with the textual fidelity of the Lombard illuminator of British Museum Add. Ms. 10, 299 cited in Note 24, who on folio 94<sup>r</sup>, for example, depicts Lia as a lady of high fashion clad in gold, as Boccaccio specifies.

47. *Comedia* XIV, 2–3, 5–6, 37–38.

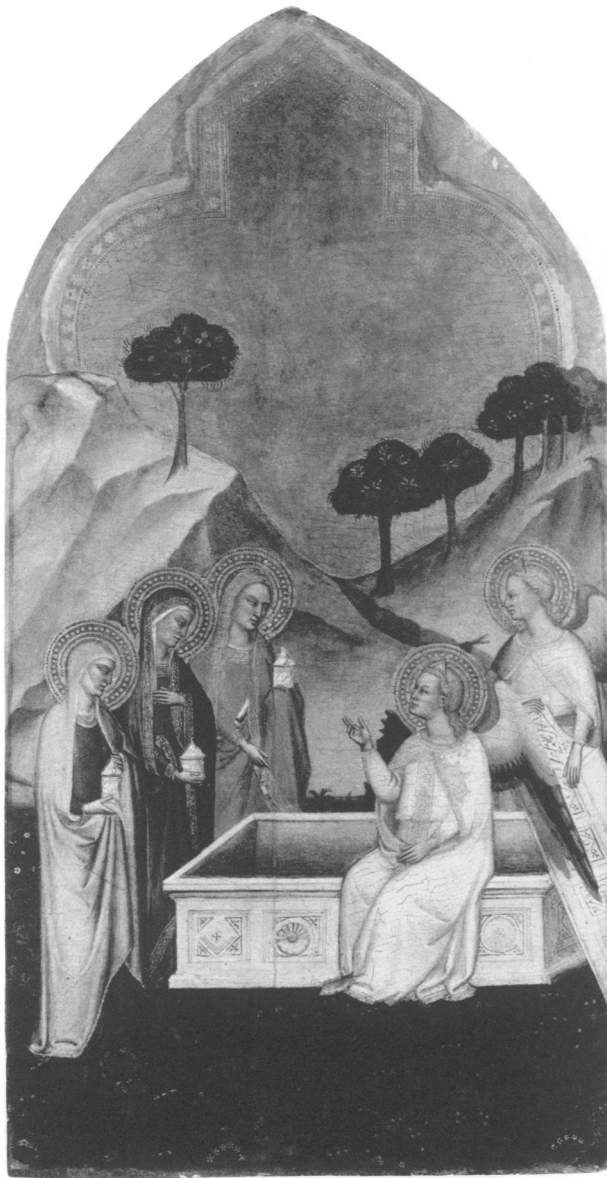


FIGURE 10  
Jacopo di Cione, *Three Marys at the Sepulcher*,  
1370–1371. National Gallery, London (photo:  
courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery)

figures assemble in a meadow where the Virgin bears witness to news of the Resurrection in the same motion as the nymph's.<sup>48</sup>

Landscape and gesture once more bring out Boccaccio's moral aims. Far from being a carefree depiction of the joys of country life, the scene is an exhortation to a life of virtue. The victor is Alcesto, whose name in Boccaccio's slightly macaronic Greek signifies a fervor for *virtù*. In his song this shepherd attacks his rival's

evil ways and justifies the appropriateness of his own virtuous name:

Your speech is false and not sincere. . . . You have twisted our song to the question of who is richer and has more in his flock, whereas it was decided that we should sing about what makes the better shepherd; whoever considers that with an eye illuminated by reason will see which one argues the better case.<sup>49</sup>

The musical debate is between pleasure and usefulness—that is, between the indulgence of self-love and the generosity of unselfish love. The spectator sees that brisk debate enacted by the shepherds, one poor, one rich, symbolized by the austere landscape, and perhaps even extended to the contrasting costumes, one simple, one ornate, of the nymphs accompanying Ameto. The viewer should look on, like Ameto, “con occhio alluminato di ragione.”

A visual narrative verging on literal representation in the first salver becomes tersely emblematic in the second. One way to understand this shift is implied in a suggestion made by Federico Zeri in the Florentine paintings catalogue. Arguing against the usual assumption that the panels were originally separate, he surmised that they were the obverse and reverse of a single salver that has been sawn apart. Presumably the eclogue was the reverse, since escutcheons appear there.<sup>50</sup> Zeri's suggestion is open to question, both because it is highly unusual to find narratives painted on both sides of a birth salver, and because the placement of heraldic devices was not uniform in the fifteenth century. The customary practice is represented by a *desco da parto* by Bartolomeo di Fruosino. The front (Figure 6) depicts in detail a scene of birth (with spaces readied for painted escutcheons), the back (Figure 11)

48. For this panel, Martin Davies, *The Earlier Italian Schools*, 2nd ed., revised (London, 1961) pp. 391–396; Offner and Steinweg, sect. 4, vol. III (1965) pp. 31–47. The Virgin's gesture occurs frequently in Florentine painting of the late trecento. Examples include St. Peter in an Ascension frescoed in the sacristy of S. Croce by Niccolò di Pietro Gerini around 1400, forming part of the same complex as our Figure 5, and a Virgin Annunciate by Lorenzo di Niccolò himself in the polyptych of 1402 that is now in Cortona.

49. *Comedia* XIV, 82–90. The etymology of “Alcesto” is explained by Quaglio in his commentary on the *Comedia* XIII, note 5. Some of the implications of Alcesto's song are discussed by Erwin Panofsky, “*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition,” *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, 1952) pp. 302, 303.



a putto who, according to the inscription, promises fecundity, easy childbirth, and riches.

Bartolomeo's salver, when considered with Zeri's interpretation, does unravel the final mystery of Lorenzo di Niccolò's panels. The visual relationship between the two sides of Bartolomeo's salver depends on contrasts of scale and imagery. Nevertheless, both sides present a common theme, childbirth, given narrative expression on one side and symbolic presentation on the other.<sup>51</sup> An identical treatment can be found in other salvers from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.<sup>52</sup> In analogous fashion, the eclogue in Lorenzo's version of the *Comedia* formed an emblematic conclusion to the initial scenes of discovery. A reasonable inference is that Boccaccio's pastoral was edited, so to speak, for salver consumption.

Lorenzo di Niccolò's treatment of the *Comedia delle Ninfhe Fiorentine* is consistent with the fortunes of the book in the quattrocento. Though never as popular as the *Decameron*, it enjoyed a steady readership, as two printed editions of 1478 and 1479 and twenty-eight manuscripts attest. Three codices, copied in 1400, 1414,

and 1417, are roughly contemporary with Lorenzo's salvers.<sup>53</sup> In some manuscripts the scribes or their employers appended their own observations on Boccaccio's elaborate allegory. Thus one manuscript, which, to judge from the author portrait adorning its incipit page, dates from the second decade of the fifteenth century, bears on the flyleaf a gloss on the nymphs who instruct Ameto. They are identified as the Virtues, chief amongst which is Faith, whom Lia represents.<sup>54</sup> Even more telling are the exegeses accompanying a codex in the Biblioteca Riccardiana. Its first owner, Giovanni di Antonio Minertetti, noted at the

53. The dated manuscripts are Florence, Bibl. Laurenziana, Cod. Ashburnham. 1346 (1400); Florence, Bibl. Nazionale, Magl. II.II.17 (1414); and Bibl. Laur., XC sup. 102 (1417). The manuscript tradition is studied in N. Bruscoli, ed., *L'Ameto, Lettere, Il Corbaccio* (Bari, 1940) pp. 267–274; Vittore Branca, *Tradizione delle opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* (Rome, 1958) pp. 13–15; and Quaglio's edition of the *Comedia*, pp. 900–901.

54. The manuscript is Florence, Bibl. Laurenziana, XLI.35, cited by Bruscoli, p. 269. The author portrait on fol. 1<sup>r</sup> is discussed by Paolo D'Ancona, *La miniatura fiorentina I* (Florence, 1914) p. 245.

50. Zeri and Gardner, pp. 54–55. Katherine Baetjer, Assistant Curator of European Paintings, has informed us that the heavy cradles at the backs of both panels have never been removed.

51. Paul F. Watson, "A *Desco da Parto* by Bartolomeo da Fruosino," *Art Bulletin* 56 (1974) pp. 4–9, with further references. The inscription on the back states that the putto literally showers gold and silver, and that women are promised childbirth "sanza noia." In the scene of childbirth on the front, a serving woman at the right commends a small kneeling figure to the mother in her childbed, just as a donor is commended to a saint. One inference is that the kneeling figure is a surrogate for the original patrons. The convention relates both paintings to each other as quasi-magical auguries of fecundity. See also Antal, pp. 355–356, and E. H. Gombrich, "Apollonio di Giovanni," reprinted in *Norm and Form*, 2nd ed. (London and New York, 1971) pp. 21, 142, note 35.

52. An important example is a salver painted by an unknown Florentine around 1400, formerly in a private collection in New York. On the obverse are episodes from the myth of Diana and Actaeon; on the reverse Justice sits enthroned. The allegorical figure raises the same question as the narrative on the other side, namely whether Diana's punishment was just; see *Metamorphoses* III, 253–255. Photographs of the panels are in the Frick Art Reference Library. Another example, pointed out to us by Katharine Baetjer, is a *desco da parto* painted in Ferrara around 1475 and now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (17.198); the obverse represents the meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and the reverse shows a putto with a cornucopia. The link connecting the two paintings is a union made ideal by wisdom and wealth. See further, Paul F. Watson, "The Christian Tradition," in *Solomon and Sheba*, ed. James B. Pritchard (London, 1974) pp. 127–128.

FIGURE 11

Reverse of salver, Figure 6 (photo: New-York Historical Society)



outset that “this book is entitled the *Nifale* [sic] *d’amore*,”<sup>55</sup> in other words, that it is a tale about nymphs and love. At the end of the manuscript, however, Giovanni observed: “This book, compiled by Giovanni Boccaccio, is not a book about nymphs, as it is entitled, but is instead a book about *virtù*.”<sup>56</sup> The same awareness that *amore* becomes *virtù* governs the ordering of Lorenzo di Niccolò’s salvers.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank Katharine Baetjer, Cynthia Carter, and Christina Rizzo of the Department of European Paintings for their assistance.

55. Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ms. 1051, cited by Bruscoli, p. 271.

56. Cited by Bruscoli, pp. 271–272. Boccaccio’s ideas on virtuous love have been recently explored by Victoria Kirkham, “Reckoning with Boccaccio’s *Questioni d’amore*,” *Modern Language Notes* 89 (1974) pp. 47–59.