Vision, *Voluptas*, and the Poetics of Water in Lorenzo Lotto’s *Venus and Cupid*

*April Oettinger*

We both came to sit by the edge of a cool and limpid spring that welled forth in that valley. Disturbed by neither beast nor bird, it kept its clarity so lovely in that forest place that it made manifest the secrets of the translucent deeps not otherwise than if it had been of purest crystal. There, ... she began again with new entreaties to constrain and conjure me, by the love I bore her, to show her the promised image. ... I answered that she could see it in the lovely pool.1

*Jacopo Sannazaro, Arcadia 8.11* (Naples, 1504)

[In the garden was] a delightful fountain carved with consummate art out of the living rock ... A little stream of clear, fresh water, gushing from the slope, fell into the fountain ... descended with a gentle sound into a miniature canal of marble; here the murmur of the water stimulates discourse.2

*Pietro Bembo, Gli Asolani* (1505)

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1 Jacopo Sannazaro, *Arcadia di M. Jacopo Sannazaro*, ed. Luigi Portirelli (Milano: Società Tipografica de’ Classici Italiani, 1806), 90–1: “Ne ponemmo ambeduo a sedere alla margine d’un fresco e limpidissimo fonte, che in quella sorgea: il quale nè da ucello, nè da fiera turbato, si bella la sua chiearezza nel salvatico luogo conservava, che non altrimenti, che se di purissimo cristallo stato fosse, i secreti del traslucido fondo manifestava. ... Ove poi che alquanto avemmo refrigerato il caldo, ella con novi preghi mi ricominciò da capo a stringere, a scongiurare per lo amore, che io le portava, che la promessa effigie le mostrassi ... Risposi, che nella bella Fontana la vedrebbe.” For the English translation, see Sannazaro, *Arcadia*, trans. Ralph Nash (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 81. *Arcadia* was composed in the late 1480s, and the first authorized printed edition appeared in 1504 in Naples.

Beneath the dappled shade of an ivy-fringed oak, Venus, adorned with a bejeweled crown, a white veil, and a single earring, smiles tentatively at her beholder (Fig. 7.1). Scattered rose petals lie gently on her hips, thighs, and pudenda, while a few stray petals and two roses are strewn on the blue cloth spread across the soft greenery where she lies. Alongside her outstretched leg, a rod extends onto the verdure, calling attention to a snake whose spiral form echoes the sinuous folds of the fabric beneath her. The serpent directs its gaze toward her hand, which she places upon her chest above a diaphanous *strophion* (a breast-band, here worn below the breasts) whose lightness echoes the grace with which she suspends a wreath of myrtle from a blue ribbon held between her thumb and index finger. From the wreath dangles a fine golden chain attached to an oil lamp set alight, suffusing the grove with smoke.

The delicate choreography of Venus’ posture reverberates in the soft trickle of urine that issues from a wry Cupid, who takes aim through the opening of the myrtle wreath held firmly in his chubby fist. His outstretched arm is begirt in a band of gauzy gilt cloth that billows behind him in the gentle breeze.