Aphrodite/Venus appears regularly in the Renaissance literary and visual arts. Patrons and artists found the image of this goddess of female beauty, fertility, and sexuality invaluable, not only as a fashionable mythological referent, indicative of their humanist interests in Classical antiquity, but also as a convenient excuse to introduce tabooed female nudity into their highly Christianized European culture. Aphrodite's appearance in art, however, is somewhat paradoxical: on the one hand, she is the marginalized object of the male gaze in a culture that privileges the male as both producer and consumer of art; on the other hand, she is a goddess, deeply rooted in western civilization, who empowers the female. She therefore has the potential to become the privileged partner within the male/female binary opposition. Images of Aphrodite are therefore of special interest in our postmodern age, with its poststructuralist love of texts containing ambiguous signs allowing for the interplay and

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1 The titles “Aphrodite” (Greek) and “Venus” (Roman) should be read as interchangeable for the purposes of this paper, although Venus is mainly used because of the Italian context. The Renaissance preferred her Roman name, because of the revival of romanitas in Italian culture, but their understanding of the nature of the goddess was drawn from both Greek and Roman literary sources: from Homer and Plato, as much as from Virgil and Ovid.


Figure 18.1. Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*, ca. 1483. Photo ©The National Gallery, London.