THE ILLUSTRIOUS POETS IN SIGNORELLI'S FRESCOES FOR THE CAPPELLA NUOVA OF ORVIETO CATHEDRAL*

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IN 1499 the Orvieto commune secured the services of Luca Signorelli after a protracted search for a painter of renown willing to undertake the fresco decoration of the Cappella Nuova in the Cathedral.[1] Fra Angelico had accepted the commission more than fifty years earlier, but painted only part of the vault before reneging on his contractual demands in 1447.[2] The concerted effort to ensure that the decoration of the Duomo's largest chapel—intended to promote the cult of local relics—should be the work of a widely acknowledged artist was part of a larger campaign[3] to rekindle outside interest in the Cathedral and attract visitors to the city. In their accounts of Signorelli's success in meeting these expectations historians have generally taken their cue from Vasari who could give no greater praise than to recount Michelangelo's admiration for the nude figures in the scenes of the Last Judgement.[4] Another novel feature of the decorative scheme,

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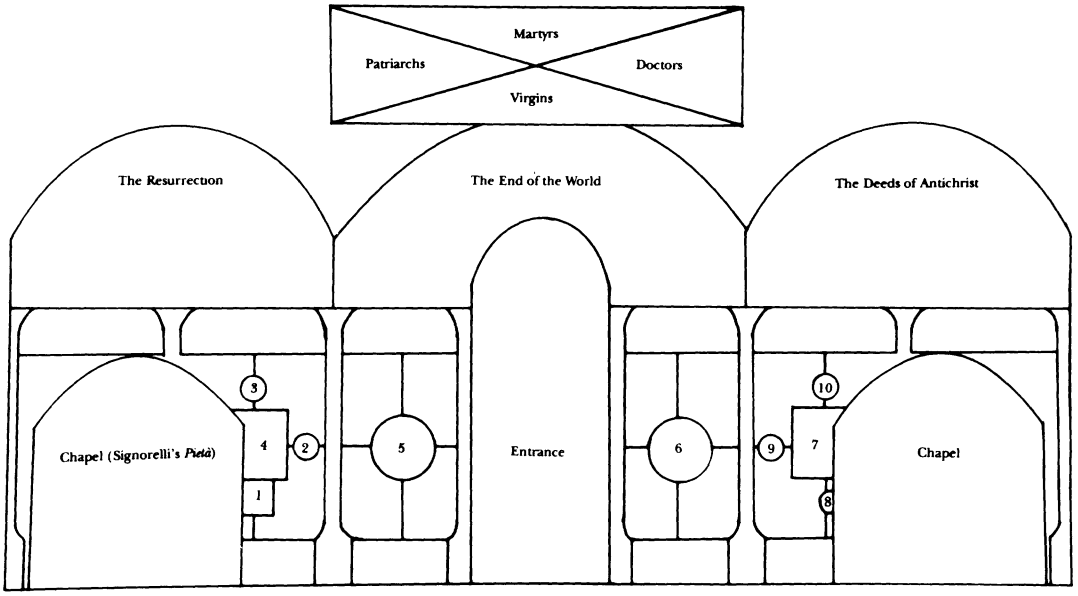
[1] San Brizio, the name traditionally given to this chapel, was not used till the 17th century when an image of the Madonna of San Brizio was placed on the main altar. All the documents relating to the Cappella Nuova commission were first published together by L. Luzi, *Il Duomo di Orvieto*, Florence 1866, pp. 432–76. The painters approached by the *Fabbrica del Duomo* all had Vatican credentials and included Perugino who negotiated with Orvieto between 1489 and 1499, Pier Matteo d'Amelia who was in the process of painting the original ceiling frescoes in the Sistine Chapel for Sixtus IV (L. D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo. Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*, Oxford 1965, pp. 15–16); and Pinturicchio who worked on the Orvieto Cathedral choir and tribune from 1492 to 1496 with frequent interruptions to comply with papal commitments (J. Schulz, 'Pinturicchio and the Revival of Antiquity', this *Journal*, xxv, 1962, pp. 35–55). Signorelli was probably recommended by Cardinal Girolamo Basso della Rovere who had employed him in the mid-1490s on the decoration of the sacristy of St John in Santa Maria of Loreto (G. Kury, *The Early Work of Signorelli 1465–90*, New York 1978, pp. 127–31). Signorelli's first contract, dated 5 April 1499, pertains to the completion of the frescoes on the vault. For the decoration of the lunettes and walls, the *Fabbrica* kept to its policy of requesting a detailed proposal, which was discussed on 23 April 1500 and approved after minor modifications; the ensuing contract, dated 27 April 1500, requests that the entire remaining surface of the chapel be covered with frescoes, that the exact design approved by the *Fabbrica* be followed, and that Signorelli himself should execute the figures; see Luzi (as above), pp. 466–75.

[2] Fra Angelico, the first of a number of painters employed in the papal court who were persuaded to undertake part-time work in nearby Orvieto, painted two of the chapel's eight vault segments; Luzi (as in n. 1), pp. 432–41.

[3] Duomo projects carried out during the second half of the 15th century include the decoration of the facade, the restoration of the organ, the tribune frescoes, the restoration of windows and the frescoes in the Cappella del Corporale; for documents pertaining to these projects as well as to the Cappella Nuova, see Luzi (as in n. 1), pp. 432–76. The Cappella Nuova, built opposite the Cappella del Corporale which housed the Cathedral's major relic, was used to display the relics of Orvieto's patron San Pietro Parenzo and probably those of another local martyr San Faustino (V. Natalini, *S. Pietro Parenzo; la leggenda scritta dal Maestro Canonico di Orvieto*, Rome 1936, p. 124). On the history of the construction and decoration of the Cappella Nuova, first proposed in 1397 and built during the 1440s, see E. Carli, *Il Duomo di Orvieto*, Rome 1965, pp. 99–122.

[4] G. Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, eds R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, iii, Florence 1971, p. 637. Vasari placed Signorelli at the very end of the second part of his *Lives* as the direct precursor to the final stage of artistic development as a result of visiting Orvieto with Michelangelo (T. S. R. Boase, *Giorgio Vasari. The Man and the Book*, Princeton, N.J. 1979, p. 63). Signorelli's fresco cycle acquired a wide reputation soon after its completion in 1504. Several guidebooks to Orvieto Cathedral and souvenir drawings



1. Dedicatory inscription.
2. Scene from the *Pharsalia.**
3. Scene from the *Pharsalia.**
4. Lucan.*
5. Unidentified poet.
6. Empedocles.*
7. Homer.*
8. Scene from the *Iliad* (fragment).*
9. Scene from the *Iliad.**
10. Scene from the *Iliad.**

* As identified by Ludovico Luzi

FIG. 1: Decorative scheme of the Cappella Nuova; north side

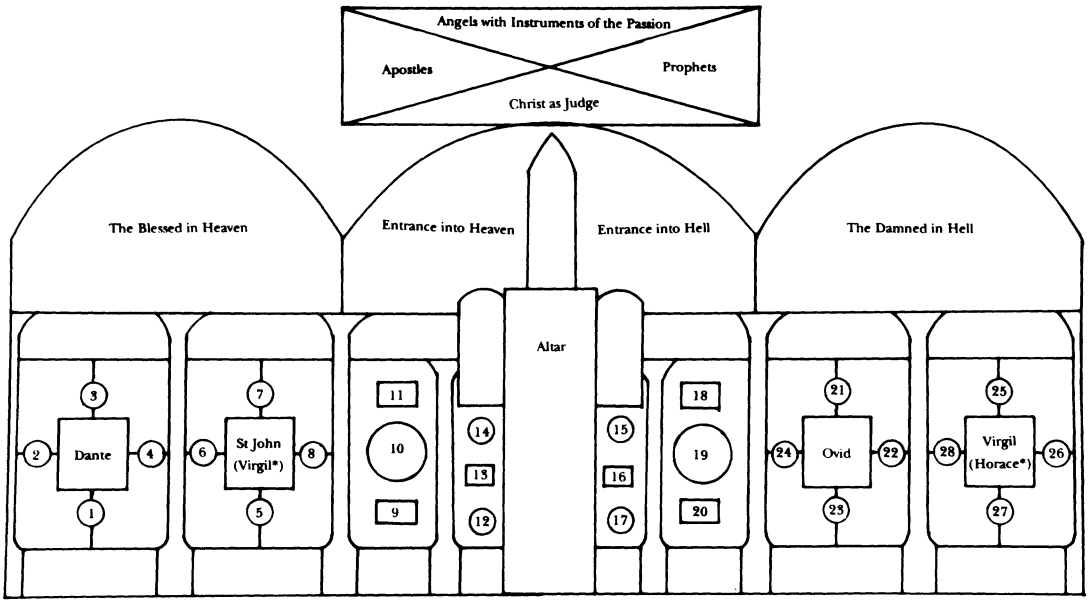
the strikingly lifelike poets who emerge from windows on a simulated gallery below the religious narrative, has received less attention (Pl. 18a). Art historians frequently comment on the conspicuous position and arresting appearance of the poets, but there has been no attempt to explain how these figures, together with the surrounding mythological narratives and grotesque ornament, function within the overall decoration of the chapel (Figs 1, 2).[5]

The representation of figures who seem to occupy the same space as the viewer, and through their poses and gestures serve to direct attention to a religious narrative, was not new to Renaissance chapel decoration. In this respect Signorelli's scheme relates to the Tuscan fresco tradition of decorative frames which dates back to the fourteenth century.[6] A case in point is Nardo di Cione's fresco cycle for the

of the Cappella Nuova produced during the first part of the 16th century attest to a new influx of visitors (F. Ames-Lewis, *Drawings in Early Renaissance Italy*, New Haven 1981, p. 3).

[5] See A. Chastel, 'L'Apocalypse en 1500: La fresque de l'Antéchrist à la chapelle Saint-Brice d'Orvieto', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, xiv, 1952, pp. 124–40; P. Scarpellini, *Luca Signorelli*, Milan 1964, pp. 40–56; and most recently J. B. Reiss, 'Luca Signorelli's Frescoes in the Chapel of San Brizio as Reflections of their Time and Place', in *Renaissance Studies in Honour of C. H. Smyth*, Florence 1985, pp. 383–93.

[6] There are numerous examples of the simulated marble dado pierced by windows with figures; an important precedent was set by the frescoes in the vault of the chancel of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1348, by Orcagna (only fragments of heads framed by windows survive; these resemble those in the Strozzi Chapel); one of the best surviving examples is in the Castellani Chapel in Santa Croce c. 1383 by followers of



1. *Purgatorio*, Canto I.
2. *Purgatorio*, Canto II.
3. *Purgatorio*, Canto III.
4. *Purgatorio*, Canto IV.
5. *Purgatorio*, Canto V.
6. *Purgatorio*, Canto VI.
7. *Purgatorio*, Canto VII.
8. *Purgatorio*, Canto VIII.
9. *Purgatorio*, Canto IX.
10. *Purgatorio*, Canto X.
11. *Purgatorio*, Canto XI.
12. Allegorical figures.*
13. Venus appears to Aeneas.*
14. Unidentified scene.
15. Unidentified scene.
16. Oeonus killed by sons of Hippocoon.*
17. Unidentified scene.
18. Devils torture the damned.
19. Perseus rescues Andromeda.
20. Phineus at the wedding of Perseus and Andromeda.
21. Proserpina with Diana, Venus and Minerva.
22. The rape of Proserpina.
23. Pluto at the gates of Hades.
24. Ceres seeking her daughter.
25. Aeneas and the Cumaean Sibyl at the entrance to Hades.
26. Hercules rescues Theseus and Peirithous from Hades.
27. Orpheus plays the lyre in Hades.
28. Orpheus loses Eurydice to Hades.

* As identified by Ludovico Luzi

FIG. 2: Decorative scheme of the Cappella Nuova; south side

Strozzi Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, in which lunettes representing the Last Judgement are supported by a continuous short wall surface painted to resemble a real structure inlaid with coloured marble (Pl. 19a).[7] In this chapel, as in the Cappella Nuova, the religious imagery is linked to the viewer through figures seen at windows on a supporting marble gallery.

While serving a traditional mediating function, the poets and their setting in the Cappella Nuova introduce interests which encourage the viewer to address this

Agnolo Gaddi. For the history of this decorative format and its classical origins, see S. Sandstrom, *Levels of Unreality. Studies in Structure and Construction in Italian Mural Painting during the Renaissance*, Uppsala 1963, pp. 23–24.

[7] F. Antal, *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*, London 1947, pp. 189–91; R. Offner, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting. The Fourteenth Century. Nardo di Cione*, Section iv, ii, New York 1960, pp. 47–60; U. Baldini, 'Die Strozzi-Kapelle des Nardo di Cione', in *Santa Maria Novella. Kirche, Kloster und Kreuzgange*, ed. U. Baldini, Stuttgart 1982, pp. 74–87. In this mid-14th-century scheme, the three lunettes with scenes of the Last Judgement correspond to the layout of the subject in the three front lunettes of the Cappella Nuova.

part of the decoration more directly than in the case of an orthodox frame. In relation to the witnesses that appear on the dado of the Strozzi Chapel, Signorelli's figures are more specifically defined, in terms of both their identity and their activity within the decorative scheme. Some consult books and scrolls (Pls 18a, 19d, 20e, 23e, 24), another turns dramatically towards the surmounting lunette of the *End of the World* (Pl. 18a), and another still is in the process of writing while his gaze is transfixed on the scene of *Christ in Judgement* (Pl. 25). These attributes and attitudes, combined with the setting along windows on a decorative frame, define the figures specifically as prophets; one can compare these to the figures on the vault of the Chapel of Girolamo Basso della Rovere in Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome—painted by Pinturicchio between 1492–94—a familiar arrangement in which the prophets and their visions, represented by the scrolls on display, foretell and legitimize the religious events represented nearby (Pl. 22a).[8]

Yet the writers in the Cappella Nuova are not religious figures. Whoever these men are, and there are reasons to doubt their traditional identification, it is apparent that they are for the most part pagans. They are not even such revered pagans as Plato and Aristotle who had come to be accepted as prophets to Christian events.[9] The bay and oak wreaths identify most of the figures as poets. These poets, moreover, are not shown, as is usual with prophets, standing at windows holding their prophecies; most of Signorelli's figures appear seated at desk-like window sills, surrounded by books, and in one case in the process of writing. In some instances the writers are not only aware of their texts and the surmounting religious narratives, they are also conscious of each other, exhibiting facial expressions and hand gestures that suggest animated discussion of their texts (Pls 20e, 23e).[10]

In these ways, as well as in their prominent situation in the room—a departure from the secondary location usually allotted to prophets—these figures conform to current 'uomini famosi' series.[11] Well established by the end of the fifteenth century as a scheme of decoration for public palaces and royal residences, the cycle of famous men came to be favoured for *studioli*, in which a particular set of illustrious classical writers declared the humanistic pretensions of the owner.[12] In the *studiolo* of Federico da Montefeltro in Urbino, for instance, pairs of classical and Christian writers, shown in an illusionistic gallery engaged in discussions, personify the

[8] This pictorial device became commonplace in Florentine fresco cycles, for example the Spanish Chapel in Santa Maria Novella, and the Castellani Chapel in Santa Croce. Signorelli also used it in panel painting, for example the *Circumcision* in the National Gallery in London (M. Davies, *The National Gallery. The Earlier Italian Schools*, London 1961, pp. 479–81).

[9] An example is the cycle of statues by Giovanni Pisano for the Siena Cathedral facade which included among its 14 sibyls and prophets Plato and Aristotle; see J. White, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1250 to 1400*, Harmondsworth 1966, pp. 71–72.

[10] Although this type of interaction is also associated with religious thinkers, for example the apostles and martyrs in Donatello's bronze doors for the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo in Florence, it became a convention for cycles of illustrious men.

[11] On cycles of famous men see A. A. Filarete, *Trattato dell'architettura*, trans. J. R. Spencer, New Haven 1965, ix, pp. 117–18; T. E. Mommsen, 'Petrarch and the Decoration of the *Sala Virorum Illustrium* in Padua', *Art Bulletin*, xxxiv, 1952, pp. 95–116; N. Rubinstein, 'Political Ideas in Sienese Art: the Frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Taddeo di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico', this *Journal*, xxi, 1958, pp. 189–207; L. Cheles, *The Studiolo of Urbino. An Iconographic Investigation*, University Park 1986, pp. 35–37; M. M. Donato, 'Gli eroi romani tra storia ed "exemplum". I primi cicli umanistici di Uomini Famosi', *Memorie dell'antico nell'arte italiana*, ed. S. Settis, ii, Turin 1985, pp. 95–152.

[12] On the decoration of *studioli* in general and Federico da Montefeltro's study in particular, see Cheles (as in n. 11), pp. 15–25, 37–52.

authority bestowed by humanists on the classical tradition, and in turn validate the Duke's position as ruler.

In the Cappella Nuova the unique conflation of two familiar but previously separate traditions can be understood in interrelated but distinct ways; the frame functions as a cycle of illustrious men which by drawing on a current version of the scheme alludes to humanist notions of knowledge, promoting in particular the individual achievements of a specific group of authors; the frame also functions as a series of pagan prefigurations that are fulfilled by and bring credibility to the surmounting Christian narrative. Certainly the cycle of poets can be regarded in these two relatively direct, unambiguous ways; and, as has emerged, there are many conventions of representation that assure the possibility of such readings. However, the elaboration of the writers' setting beyond the expected, for either illustrious men or religious prophets, bears further consideration, for it expands and complicates the two readings suggested above.

In updating the conventional frame used in Tuscan frescoes, Signorelli responded to an audience attuned to, and increasingly more skilful at reading, illusionistic painting. Instead of the traditional coloured marble, the walls of the Cappella Nuova appear to be lined with panels covered in grotesque ornament;[13] these designs are not only pleasing in themselves but they also serve to emphasize the existence of a solid structure which supports the visionary images of the *Apocalypse* and behind which the poets are set. In relation to this seemingly flat surface, the viewer may distinguish between diverse simulated layers: a stucco band which frames and criss-crosses each panel, and encases the central windows; circular and rectangular stucco figurative compartments; flat pilasters between the panels which support a continuous frieze; and a platform with projecting classical reliefs.

While this structure would prove challenging to someone familiar with illusionistic frames in traditional Tuscan chapel decoration, it is in relation to fresco cycles patronized by the papal court during the 1490s that its most novel features emerge.[14] It is useful to compare the fresco scheme in the Chapel of Girolamo Basso della Rovere in Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome, with the one devised by Signorelli only a few years later.[15] The vault of the della Rovere Chapel is one of the first instances in which grotesque ornament is used to construct an illusionistic structure appropriate to Christian figures, particularly prophets (Pl. 22a).[16] Grotesque ornament covers the entire vault, while each of its segments is pierced by a window that frames the half-length figure of a turbaned prophet or sibyl holding a scroll with a prophecy. Figures and ornament from antiquity, through their proximity, set themselves apart, distinguished from the rest of the decoration not

[13] The illusionistic scheme in the Cappella Nuova is discussed by Sandstrom (as in n. 6), p. 165.

[14] Three of the painters courted by the *Fabbrica* were prominent exponents of so-called grotesque style of wall decoration, consistently endorsed by the papal court and associated with the much promoted excavation of the Golden House of Nero in Rome. On the revival of Roman wall decoration during the 1490s in Rome and the contribution of these three painters, see N. Dacos, *La Découverte de la Domus Aurea et la formation des grotesques à la Renaissance*, London 1969, pp. 57–117; Schulz (as in n. 1), pp. 35–55.

[15] On Pinturicchio's decorative scheme for the Chapel of Girolamo Basso della Rovere see Sandstrom (as in n. 6), pp. 160–65; Schulz (as in n. 1), p. 48; Dacos (as in n. 14), pp. 62–69; E. Bentivoglio and S. Valtieri, *Santa Maria del Popolo a Roma*, Rome 1976, pp. 87–90.

[16] Another example is the setting of the four evangelists on the vault of the Cappella Maggiore in Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, painted by Pinturicchio for Giuliano della Rovere.

only by appearing as three-dimensional entities rather than as a painted surface, but also by suggesting a different historical period.

The pictorial convention of distinguishing between the seemingly 'real' or sculptural setting of an ancient prophecy and the fictive or painterly form of its Christian realization was part of the informed Renaissance person's visual experience. In the Cappella Nuova the juxtaposition of ancient writers and grotesque ornament can therefore be seen to reinforce the role of the figures as prophets to the surmounting cycle of the Last Judgement. But in contrast to the scheme in the della Rovere Chapel, Signorelli's combination of antique elements does not leave this highly conventionalized pictorial format unaltered; the use of pagan poets instead of biblical prophets is one reason the traditional relationship between the two sections of the decoration is brought into question; another is the recasting of the classical decorative devices in ways which encourage the viewer on the one hand to entertain its elements more independently, and on the other hand to integrate them more directly into the religious scheme as a whole.

In the decorative schemes devised by Pinturicchio and Perugino—religious and secular ones alike—classical ornament plays an overall marginal role. The Chapel of Girolamo Basso della Rovere is typical in relegating the grotesque motifs to the vault, pilasters and other architectural elements, as well as in restricting the motifs to monochrome tones and rigid candelabra shapes.[17] Without the option of applying antique ornament to the vault, Signorelli came up with the bold solution of displaying it in what is virtually the most visible part of the chapel, namely the wall surface. While this location alone would have permitted a closer examination of grotesque than usual, its brilliant colouring and expansive character were bound to draw attention.[18] In the variety, exuberance and colouring of the grotesque motifs, Signorelli approaches, more successfully than any of his contemporaries, the overall appearance of the classical prototype.

Yet it would be misleading to imply that Signorelli's scheme, either in general arrangement or in detail, displays particular concern with reproducing accurately available models of Roman wall decoration. On the contrary, very few of the grotesque motifs can be traced directly to the Golden House of Nero, and those that can, reappear significantly transformed.[19] While the mythological narratives in grisaille may recall the stucco figurative compartments in the *Domus Aurea*, their systematic distribution around the poets, and presentation of the nude figure contrasted against a plain backdrop, resemble much more the classical cameos on the illuminated decorative borders of Renaissance manuscripts.[20] In fact the overall combination of elements seems to have been first devised by Monte di Giovanni—an illuminator whose use of current classical imagery catered to an exclusive circle of book collectors—for the frontispiece of a 1488 manuscript of Didymus owned by King Matthias Corvinus (Pl. 22b).[21] In this instance the portrait of the scholar St

[17] Dacos (as in n. 14), pp. 66–69.

[18] ibid., pp. 72–74.

[19] ibid., p. 73; the most recognizable borrowings are the owls from the *Volta delle civette* and the satyrs from the *Volta gialla*.

[20] See J. J. G. Alexander, *Italian Renaissance Illuminations*, London 1977, pls 4, 5, 40.

[21] New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M. 496 fol. 2; see A. Garzelli, *Miniatura Fiorentina del Rinascimento 1440–1525*, 2 vols, i, pp. 310–12; ii, plate xii; on the exchange between Monte di Giovanni and fresco painting which features grotesque ornament, see pp. 272–73, 275. See further *Italian Manuscripts in the*

Jerome, surrounded by circular cameos with classical narratives, is set on an elaborate architectural structure covered with grotesque ornament; even the highly illusionistic platform at the base of the chapel, painted to resemble a series of sarcophagus reliefs, is a feature of this illumination and has no counterpart in Roman wall decoration.[22]

Signorelli departs from this decorative scheme by using the grisaille compartments—hitherto relegated to an ornamental device—to represent the authors' writings; consequently the viewer is confronted not only with the unusual sight (in a chapel at least) of mythological narratives, but also with prophecies which are revealed visually rather than in the form of inscriptions.

The juxtaposition of an author portrait with pictorial representations of his texts is not without precedent, particularly in manuscript illumination which is inherently concerned with the interplay of meaning between script and image.[23] In Christian illumination, for instance, the evangelist portrait often includes a depiction of the vision that the writer is in the process of recording; in these the pictorial image brings authority to the text by making its divine origins explicit.[24] A different relationship between author and writings is implied in Simone Martini's celebrated representation of Virgil for the frontispiece of Petrarch's manuscript of Virgil's works; the poet, reclining in a grove, is revealed by his commentator Servius to three characters who represent at once Virgil's three classes of readers and his three major poems.[25] These images serve to assert the moral and ethical value of Virgil's works, and are thus crucial to the presentation of Virgil as the supreme classical poet and Petrarch's own prototype.[26] Most Renaissance author portraits emphasize the accomplishments of the individual writer rather than his source of inspiration, and contribute to the institution of a particular canon of classical and Christian writers.[27] Domenico di Michelino's picture of Dante in the Duomo of Florence (Pl. 21b) shows the poet holding a book and standing on a landscape which includes scenes from the *Divina Commedia* and the cityscape of Florence. Dante appears here as the illustrious Florentine whose literary achievement confers honour on his city and warrants such a large-scale representation in the Cathedral.

The grisaille narratives of the Cappella Nuova, clearly grouped in relation to particular writers, may be seen to attest to the achievement of the writer in question; yet they can, and indeed must, be regarded as visions which prefigure the Last Judgement, if their appearance in a religious context is to be justified. Yet the precarious balance between these two readings is disturbed by the fact that the only

Pierpont Morgan Library, New York 1953, pp. 39–40, no. 47, pl. 49.

[22] An adaptation of the same device appears in the Chapel of Basso della Rovere, although here the classical reliefs represent appropriate religious subjects.

[23] O. Pächt, *Book Illumination in the Middle Ages*, London 1986, pp. 173–205.

[24] Another manuscript illumination tradition is that of the evangelist in a state of divine inspiration; see C. de Tolnay, 'The "Visionary" Evangelists of the Reichenau School', *Burlington Magazine*, lxix, 1936, pp. 257–60; W. Weisbach, 'Les Images des Évangélistes dans "L'Évangéliaire d'Othon III" et leurs rapports avec l'antiquité', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, xvii, 1939, pp. 131–52.

[25] On the interpretation of this image of the poet see J. Brink, 'Simone Martini, Francesco Petrarca and the Humanist Program of the Virgil Frontispiece', *Mediaevalia*, iii, 1977, pp. 83–117; J. Gregory, 'Simone Martini's Frontispiece to Petrarch's Virgil: Sources and Meaning', *Australian Journal of Art*, ii, 1980, pp. 33–40.

[26] Brink (as in n. 25), p. 94.

[27] In Renaissance manuscripts the author portrait most frequently appears in the context of the initial letter, thus drawing a direct link between the words written by the author in the illumination and the script on the page; for various examples see Garzelli (as in n. 21), ii, pp. 284–87.

writer—the so-called Virgil (Pl. 25)—who is specifically defined as a visionary, that is in the process of writing while in a trance, is surrounded by grisaille compartments which depict not his own writings but those of his immediate neighbour, Dante (Pl. 24). If the focus of this writer's gaze, *Christ in Judgement*, is understood as a transitory divine vision which he is recording, then the scenes in grisaille must be stories written in the past by men and preserved in books. By inserting such an explicit example of the traditional religious visionary within the cycle of illustrious poets, the scheme further complicates the reading of the mythological stories and introduces discrepancies between the writers in terms of their source of authority.

To consider in greater detail how this novel combination of elements may have been addressed by Renaissance viewers, it is necessary to identify the writers and their narratives. Unlike traditional schemes of illustrious men, the cycle in the Cappella Nuova provides no explanatory inscriptions;[28] it would seem that the viewer must arrive at the identities of the writers by working out the interrelations set up between the various components of the frame. And indeed there is no lack of clues; the writers are linked to the surrounding narratives, to each other—in two instances they form pairs—and to the surmounting religious scenes.

The traditional identification of the poets was established by Ludovico Luzi in 1866 and has been accepted by art historians ever since;[29] Luzi argued that Dante (Pl. 24)—the only figure that can be securely identified from his physical appearance—provides the key to the identity of the other writers. According to this reading Dante is paired with Virgil and the rest of the figures are the most celebrated pagan poets encountered by these two in the fourth canto of the *Inferno*: Homer, Empedocles, Orpheus, Lucan, Horace and Ovid.[30] While such a grouping of illustrious writers may be in keeping with Renaissance practice, it cannot be sustained if the authors are seen in their particular context.

Dante is paired with a writer whom Luzi identified as Virgil, primarily because the two are surrounded by scenes from the *Purgatorio* (Pl. 25).[31] Yet this writer, who appears in the most privileged location along the wall—closest to the altar and to the right of Christ—is distinguished from the rest of the authors in the chapel, including Dante, in a number of significant ways. He does not wear the poet's wreath, as one would certainly expect of Virgil.[32] Instead his most distinctive physical characteristic is an unruly mane of hair, which, together with his expressive pose, writing excitedly while he gazes directly at the scene of Christ in Judgement, suggests a figure under the power of divine inspiration. Even more telling is the fact that this writer looks nothing like the representation of Virgil in the narrative scenes of the *Purgatorio*; in these, Virgil has closely-cropped hair and wears a wreath

[28] On the use of explanatory incriptions, usually of a moralizing kind, see Filarete (as in n. 11).

[29] Luzi (as in n. 1), pp. 168–94.

[30] ibid., pp. 168–69. Before Luzi established the modern tradition of identification, opinion varied on the identities of the poets; as late as 1857 the Cathedral guide, *Descrizione del Duomo di Orvieto e del Posso volgarmente detto di S. Patrizio*, Orvieto 1857, p. 40, states that the poets to the right of the altar are Claudian and Virgil, instead of Ovid and Horace as Luzi suggested.

[31] Luzi (as in n. 1), pp. 170–75. On the scenes from *Purgatorio* see M. Apollonio and P. Rotondi, *Temi Danteschi ad Orvieto*, Milan 1965.

[32] On the poet's coronation wreath in the Renaissance see J. B. Trapp, 'The Owl's Ivy and the Poet's Bays. An Enquiry into Poetic Garlands', this *Journal*, xxi, 1958, pp. 227–55.

and a distinctive robe which has fur collar and cuffs and is tied at the front with a simple brooch (Pl. 21c).

There is, on the opposite side of the room, a poet fitting this description, but he is usually identified as Horace (Pl. 21a).[33] In order to resolve this question of identity, it is necessary to examine the narratives that surround the so-called Horace, as well as the relationship between this poet and his immediate neighbour. The scene directly above this writer shows Aeneas led into Hades by the Cumaean Sibyl (Pl. 20a); she holds the golden bough while he unsheathes his sword and prepares to encounter the three-headed Cerberus and the Vices that guard the entrance to the Underworld.[34] This is followed on the right by a representation of Hercules conquering Cerberus as he tries to rescue Theseus and Peirithous from Hades (Pl. 20b). Next in the sequence, below the poet, there is a scene of Orpheus playing the lyre to the inhabitants of the Underworld, including Pluto and Proserpina (Pl. 20d). Finally the scene to the left of the poet shows Eurydice pulled back into Hades as Orpheus turns to look at her (Pl. 20c).

Evidently all the scenes are linked by the theme of the Underworld, specifically the various journeys into Hades undertaken by classical heroes. The Underworld descents of Aeneas, Hercules, Theseus and Orpheus are grouped together in the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*.[35] In fact the first of these four narratives represents the very moment in Virgil's poem in which these characters are brought together. Aeneas, about to descend into Hades, compares himself with Hercules, Theseus, Orpheus and other heroes who entered the Underworld and were able to overcome death. The surrounding narratives then substantiate the identification of this poet as Virgil.

The poet next to Virgil is usually identified as Ovid (Pl. 23e).[36] Like Virgil (and Dante) he wears a simple crown of bay, and the two face each other in a lively debate based on the evidence provided by their books; apparently the subject of the debate is the Underworld, for Ovid is surrounded by four scenes from the story of Pluto and Proserpina (Pl. 23a–d). However, not all the episodes around Ovid can be explained by the account of the myth in the *Metamorphoses*.[37] Above the poet, the first scene of the cycle shows Proserpina with three goddesses, two of whom can be identified from their attributes as Diana and Minerva (Pl. 23a). This version of the story originates in Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae* which recounts that Proserpina was gathering flowers in a meadow in the company of Diana, Minerva and Venus at the time of her abduction.[38] While this might, and indeed did, lead some viewers to deduce that the author of these scenes is Claudian, Renaissance visitors were more likely to arrive at another conclusion.[39] Claudian's account had found its way—via a number of mythographers—to the immensely popular and widely circulated *Ovidio vulgarizato*, the much augmented Italian paraphrase of the *Metamorphoses*, first published in 1497 and regarded as the work of Ovid.[40]

[33] Luzi (as in n. 1), pp. 190–93.

[34] The reclining nudes at the entrance of Hades appear to comply with Virgil's description of the Vices in *Aeneid*, vi, 274–81.

[35] Virgil, *Aeneid*, vi, 119–23.

[36] Luzi (as in n. 1), pp. 187–90.

[37] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, v, 385–563.

[38] Claudian, *De raptu Proserpinae*, iii, 202–43.

[39] See n. 30 above.

[40] *Ovidio vulgarizato*, v, xxi-xxv, Venice 1497, pp. 39/b–40/a.

The *Ovidio vulgarizato* follows, and to some extent encouraged, the Renaissance practice of grouping mythological stories according to a particular theme.[41] The compartments surrounding Ovid and Virgil address this familiar way of thinking about classical myths, and the relevance of the *Ovidio vulgarizato* itself in this cluster of narratives may be deduced from other references to the popular text. On the wall immediately to the right of Ovid, and directly beneath the lunette of *The Damned led into Hell* (Fig. 2), there are three grisaille compartments, two of which represent the Ovidian story of Perseus and Andromeda while the third shows an unspecified scene of the Underworld with nude figures tortured by devils. Even the particulars of at least three of the scenes surrounding Virgil adhere to accounts in the *Ovidio vulgarizato*. Hercules's defeat of Cerberus, for example, refers to the story popularized by this text that the hero was sent to the Underworld by Ceres to retrieve Theseus and Peirithous who had previously been asked by the goddess to rescue Proserpina; in keeping with this version of the story, Peirithous who died during the escape is shown lying lifeless at Theseus's feet (Pl. 20b).[42] The two scenes devoted to Orpheus likewise stress the myth's link with Pluto and Proserpina, and in this way recall the retelling of this legend in the *Ovidio vulgarizato*.[43] In the latter, these and other stories of Underworld heroes and inhabitants are explicitly linked, not simply because they share a theme, but because they are discussed together in the section devoted to the abduction of Proserpina.[44]

The grouping of the narratives in this section of the decoration remains fairly flexible, and rather than prescribing a single combination of stories and one particular theme, the ensemble of myths suggest a range of interrelated thematic groups. Erudite visitors may well have been able to recall Virgil's passage in the *Aeneid* which brings together the famous heroes who descended into the Underworld while still in life, and perhaps even one of the numerous allegorical interpretations of this passage in Renaissance poetry and philosophical tracts.[45] Those familiar with Ovid's stories would have been able to group Pluto and Proserpina, Orpheus and Eurydice, and Perseus and Andromeda, as famous Ovidian lovers. To the reader of the *Ovidio vulgarizato* an even more specific reference was possible, the particular passage in this text where the stories which surround Ovid and Virgil are recounted as part of the theme of the Underworld. Yet however these stories were grouped, and whatever theme emerged for different viewers, this type of reading is one that was usually part of a different social experience; in the decoration of secular residences and palaces, mythological groupings entertained the visitor, complimented the owner, and provided the focus of an exchange in which both had the opportunity to demonstrate their access to a classical education.[46] One can only assume that the mythological scenes in the Cappella

[41] E. H. Gombrich, 'Aims and Limits of Iconology', in *Symbolic Images. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, Oxford 1978, pp. 7–8.

[42] *Ovidio vulgarizato* (as in n. 40), v, xxv, pp. 40/b–41/a.

[43] ibid., x, 4, pp. 84/a-b.

[44] See n. 43 above.

[45] The first major Renaissance interpretation of this passage from the Aeneid appears in Coluccio Salutati's *De laboribus Herculis*, iv, 5 (ed. B. L. Ullman, 2 vols, Turin 1951, pp. 488–89), with a comparison of the motives of the Underworld journeys of Aeneas, Hercules, Orpheus, Theseus and Peirithous. Among the variations on the theme is Lorenzo de'Medici's *Comento ad alcuni sonnetti d'amore*, in *Opere scelte*, ed. E. Maier, Novara 1969, p. 142.

[46] Filarete (as in n. 11), p. 117.

Nuova activated the same process, although now accommodated to a very different context.

What seems to justify the grouping of pagan poets and their myths in this setting is the assumption that it will be followed by the more traditional reading of the ensemble as a prophecy of the surmounting religious cycle. The same sequence is suggested by other clusters of narratives along the supporting frame. The eleven scenes from Dante's *Purgatorio* which surround Dante and his neighbour, and are (like those from the *Ovidio vulgarizato* on the opposite side) extended to the adjacent altar wall, form a continuous narrative which must be considered as a unit before addressing its relation to the surmounting lunette. As for the narratives surrounding the two poets who are opposite each other on the side walls at the back of the chapel, these too may be linked under one general theme which can in turn be related to the surmounting lunettes.

The two poets in question (Pls 18b, 19d) share a number of features which alert the viewer to consider them as a unit; both are located at the side of and directly behind small identical facing chapels which cut into their window space, both turn their heads in the direction of the chapel entrance, and both are surrounded by scenes depicting the nude figure engaged in violent physical action. The writer to the left of the entrance and directly beneath the first episode in the religious cycle —the *Deeds of Antichrist*—is surrounded by two grisaille compartments which represent stories from the *Iliad*.[47] The scene to the right of the poet depicts one of the celebrated narratives engraved by Vulcan on the shield of Achilles (Pl. 18c).[48] Two men who disputed over the blood money for a slain man are held back while elders, some holding a herald's staff, pass judgement. The compartment above the poet represents an episode from the ensuing battle between the Trojans and the Greeks, probably the climactic encounter in which Hector was slain by Achilles.[49]

These narratives thus corroborate the identification of this figure, by Luzi and others before him, as Homer.[50] As befits Homer, the writer is shown wearing a classical toga tied at the right shoulder. His striking bald head turns towards a book which stands at the edge of the window sill; while carefully pinpointing a passage in this book with his fingers, his gaze appears to remain unfocused, perhaps complying with the Renaissance belief that Homer was blind.[51] But even more telling is this figure's location below the first religious scene, thus adhering to the humanist practice of placing Homer at the forefront of any historical chronology of poets.[52]

Homer is linked to the poet directly opposite him for reasons already noted, yet this juxtaposition serves to highlight some striking physical differences between the two (Pl. 19d). In contrast to the bald Homer, the poet below the *Resurrection* has long curly hair and wears a flamboyant oak wreath with prominent acorns. These differences serve to define the poets as individuals and in turn to stress their particular achievements, but they also register chronological and geographical distinctions between them. From the surrounding scenes, the figure opposite

[47] A third narrative compartment is only partly visible.

[48] Homer, *Iliad*, xviii, 478–508.

[49] Luzi and others have loosely identified this and the previous scene as the images engraved on Achilles's shield.

[50] Luzi (as in n. 1), pp. 169–70.

[51] For example the representation of the blind Homer in Raphael's *Parnassus* in the Sala della Segnatura.

[52] See for example L. Bruni, *Prooemium in quasdam orationes Homeri*, in *Leonardo Bruni. Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften*, ed. H. Baron, Leipzig 1928, pp. 132–33.

Homer was identified by Luzi as the Roman poet Lucan.[53] Both compartments represent nude men engaged in violent physical encounters which remain fairly generalized but which have been associated with the description of the battle of Pharsalia between the forces of Caesar and Pompey in Lucan's historical epic, the *Pharsalia* (Pl. 19b, c).[54] If this is indeed the case, then the oaken wreath which distinguishes this writer, not only from Homer but from the poets wearing bay wreaths, may refer to the tradition of honouring poets with garlands of oak in the Capitoline Games in Rome.[55]

These scenes, being non-specific, do not help to establish the poet's identity. At the same time, they do not offer the viewer the pleasures of grouping familiar mythological narratives. In fact they are principally an outlet for Signorelli's skilful depiction of nudes in highly expressive and explicitly difficult attitudes. The representation of the nude figure engaged in violent struggle is one of the most obvious ways in which the frescoes as a whole address the interests of an exclusive circle of collectors and patrons from the metropolitan centres. Signorelli earned his crucial place in Vasari's *Lives* because of his distinctive treatment of the nude, and the figure drawings produced in the early sixteenth century as souvenirs of the chapel are reason enough to suppose that in his admiration of this kind of imagery Vasari was not alone.[56] It is in the compartments surrounding Lucan and Homer that one finds the most unrestrained classicizing renditions of the human figure in the entire decoration, thus highlighting a pictorial vocabulary which reappears throughout the frescoes in an impressive number of variations.

To return to the poets, their apparent chronological arrangement around the chapel provides the main clue to the identity of the two figures on the entrance wall and directly beneath the lunette of the *End of the World*. These offer little else as evidence; one (to the right of the entrance) is too damaged to decipher, and the other (to the left) is characterized as a Greek by his attire which includes a turban (Pl. 18a).[57] He may well be, as Luzi suggested, the Greek poet and religious teacher Empedocles;[58] although his writings were unknown in the Renaissance, Empedocles was regarded as an authority on the four natural elements, an appropriate area of expertise for a writer who is here shown dramatically turning towards a lunette depicting the end of the world by fire, water, earthquakes and meteors.[59]

If viewed in relation to both the chronological arrangement of the poets, and the surmounting religious cycle, the writer paired with Dante, who is privy to the most solemn visions of Christian salvation, is more likely to be a Christian than a pagan (Pl. 25). On the visual evidence—he is the only writer shown in the process

[53] Luzi (as in n. 1), pp. 193–94.

[54] Lucan, *Pharsalia*, vii, 200–738. The *Pharsalia* was translated into Italian in 1492; see R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries: from the Carolingian Age to the End of the Renaissance*, New York 1964, pp. 530–31.

[55] On the use of oak to crown poets in the Capitoline Games at Rome and its association with civic virtue, see Trapp (as in n. 32), pp. 234–35; see also J. B. Trapp, 'The Poet Laureate: Rome, Renovatio and Translatio Imperii', in *Rome. The City and the Myth*, ed. C. Ramsey, Binghamton 1982, pp. 99, 121–23.

[56] Ames-Lewis (as in n. 4).

[57] In current guides to the Cathedral the damaged figure is identified as Orpheus; see for example *The Cathedral of Orvieto*, Narni-Terni 1977, p. 21. On Renaissance notions of Greek costume see S. M. Newton, *Renaissance Theatrical Costume and the Sense of the Historic Past*, London 1975, p. 44.

[58] Luzi (as in n. 1), p. 195.

[59] On Empedocles and his writings, see *Empedocles: The Extant Fragments*, ed. M. R. Wright, New Haven 1981.

of writing, and he does this in an obvious state of profound inspiration provoked by a vision of *Christ in Judgement*—one might well conclude that he is an evangelist, specifically St John, the author of *Revelation.*[60] In the Renaissance, St John and Dante were generally regarded as the major authorities on eschatology, and although there is no visual tradition that links the two figures, it should be noted that Signorelli did not represent them engaged in conversation as he did in the case of Ovid and Virgil. On the contrary, Dante is engrossed in his books while St John is conscious only of the religious events which he is in the process of recording. This identification is in accordance with the chapel's over-all religious scheme. Only the two Christian writers are shown as seers of Christian salvation; the pagan poets meanwhile are endowed with visions of lesser consequence.

It is fitting that Ovid and Virgil, the two most popular classical poets of the Renaissance, should be paired and presented as the foremost authorities on pagan Hades. The two, surrounded by their visions of pagan Hades, are surmounted by the lunette of Christian Hell. On the opposite side, Dante and St John are surrounded by scenes from *Purgatorio* and appear directly below the lunette representing Christian heaven. The discerning viewer may have observed that the narrative sequence on these facing walls is reversed; the scenes of *Purgatorio* should be read from the bottom upwards, clockwise around each of the two writers, while those of pagan Hades start at the top of the two poets and move downwards. Hence, in addition to setting up the traditional contrast between the damned and the blessed in the lunettes, the walls of the chapel present a comparative account of the journey of the human soul to reach those final destinations; Purgatorio leads upwards to heaven while pagan Hades and Christian Hell imply the continuous and unchanging state of damnation. This is but one reading of the complex and in some ways contradictory set of interrelations set up by the scheme, and it may well be that a variety of explanations emerged, or that such links were explored only to a limited degree.

While the scheme permits most aspects of the traditional relationship between the two sections of the decoration—solid structure versus visionary images, the classical past fulfilled by the Christian future—the unprecedented presentation of the prophecies visually rather than as inscriptions must have encouraged some viewers to entertain less conventional parallels. The pictorial parallels between the Christian and classical scenes are too obvious to have gone unnoticed. For example, the mass of bodies compressed into the scene of Orpheus in Hades (Pl. 20d) is a smaller concentrated version of the writhing bodies on the surmounting lunette of Hell. This kind of reading is particularly relevant to the poets and narratives at the back of the chapel; only Signorelli's flamboyant handling of the nude in action links the scenes surrounding Homer with the surmounting lunette of *Antichrist* or those next to Lucan with the *Resurrection.*

While one can only speculate on the extent to which the novel depiction of the human figure may have suggested these and other parallels, there can be little doubt that this kind of comparison served the traditional reading of the scheme.

[60] For a comparable pictorial example see the evangelists on the choir vault of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome; Schulz (as in n. 1), pl. 8a.

Even the most unexpected elements of the supporting structure could be reassimilated in terms established by convention precisely because the informed viewer had an elaborate and well-exercised apparatus for dealing with visual stimuli within such a framework. The decoration presumes an audience which could draw on and manipulate an extensive range of visual conventions, including the most current mural decoration developed in the elite circle of the papal court; it also presumes access to the writings of a number of classical authors, or at least contemporary paraphrases of these texts. The unusual conflation of two traditionally separate types of figures—the Christian prophet and the illustrious classical poet—proved flexible enough to incorporate fashionable elements which did not necessarily disrupt codes of decorum but which appealed to an audience with highly developed cultural awareness and expectations.

The cycle of illustrious poets, moreover, rather than undermining the traditional functions of the decoration, gave contemporary resonance and credibility to the religious narrative by associating it with textual sources championed by humanists. Overriding any potential conflict between human and divine knowledge are the achievements of successive outstanding individuals.[61] The set of writers in the chapel comprises three Greeks—Homer, Empedocles and perhaps Orpheus—three Romans—Lucan, Virgil and Ovid—and two Christians—St John the Evangelist and Dante. This general chronological sequence was advocated by Petrarch for cycles of famous men, and is a convention of illustrated Renaissance histories of the world which consist of consecutive images of famous men in chronological order.[62] As the contributions of outstanding individuals, the accompanying narratives serve to convey in visual terms the notion of a historical accumulation of human wisdom and moral example.[63] In the Cappella Nuova the grouping of illustrious poets and their accomplishments endows the religious narrative with a new form of authority which is all the more persuasive because it purports to set the Last Judgement on a historically based, and hence seemingly objective, foundation of knowledge.

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[61] On the humanist study of history and the role of biography as a form of history, see W. Ullmann, *Medieval Foundations of Renaissance Humanism*, Ithaca NY 1977, pp. 161–80.

[62] For Petrarch's views on cycles of famous men, see Mommsen (as in n. 11). Examples of illustrated histories include the *Illustrated Universal History* (1435–1442) by Leonardo da Besozzo in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, and the *Florentine Picture Chronicle* (1455–1466) by Maso Finiguerra in the British Museum in London; see S. Colvin, *A Florentine Picture-Chronicle*, London 1898.

[63] Humanist views on the didactic functions of history and poetry are discussed by F. Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini. Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence*, Princeton 1965, pp. 203–35.

a—Poets in north-east corner (*pp.* 72, 74, 82)

b—Homer (detail of Pl. 18a) (*p.* 81)

c—Scene from the *Iliad* (detail of Pl. 18a) (*p.* 81)

a–c: Signorelli, Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova

a—Nardo di Cione, decorative frame. Florence, Sta Maria Novella, Strozzi Chapel (*p.* 73)

d—Lucan (*pp.* 74, 81)

b, c—Scenes from the *Pharsalia* (*p.* 82)

b–d: Signorelli, Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova

a—Aeneas and the Cumaean Sibyl (*p.* 79)

b—Hercules defeats Cerberus (*pp.* 79f)

e—Virgil with scenes from the *Aeneid* (*p.* 74)

c—Orpheus and Eurydice (*p.* 79)

a–d: Details of Pl. 20e

d—Orpheus in Hades (*pp.* 79, 83)

a–e: Signorelli, Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova

a—Virgil (detail of Pl. 20e) (*p.* 79)

b—Domenico di Michelino, Dante.
Florence, Sta Maria del Fiore (*p.* 77)

c—Detail of Dante and Virgil, *Purgatorio, Canto* 2 (*p.* 79)

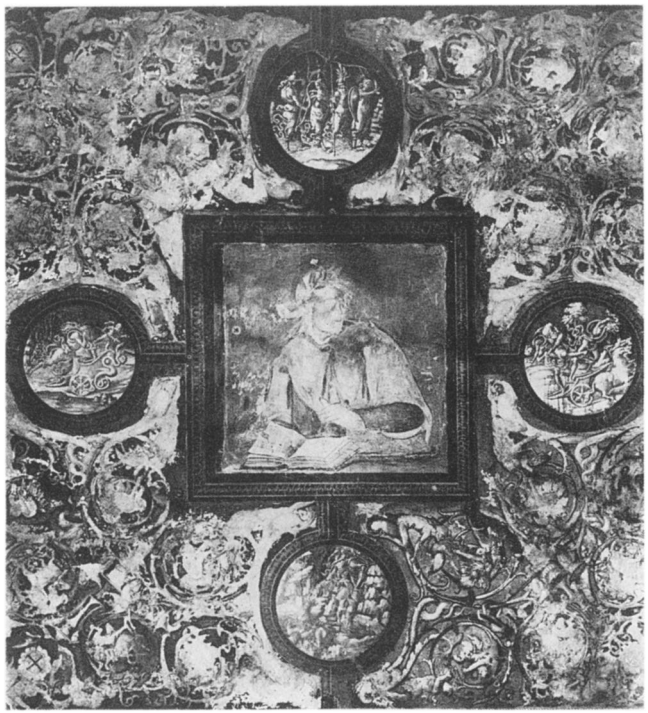
a, c: Signorelli, Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova

a—Pinturicchio, vault decoration, Chapel of Girolamo Basso della Rovere. Rome, Sta Maria del Popolo (*pp.* 74f)

b—Monte de Giovanni, *St Jerome*, with cameos and ornament. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M 496, fol. 2 (*p.* 76)

a—Proserpina with Venus, Diana and Minerva (*p.* 79)

b—Rape of Proserpina (*p.* 79)



e—Ovid with scenes from the myth of Proserpina (*p.* 79)

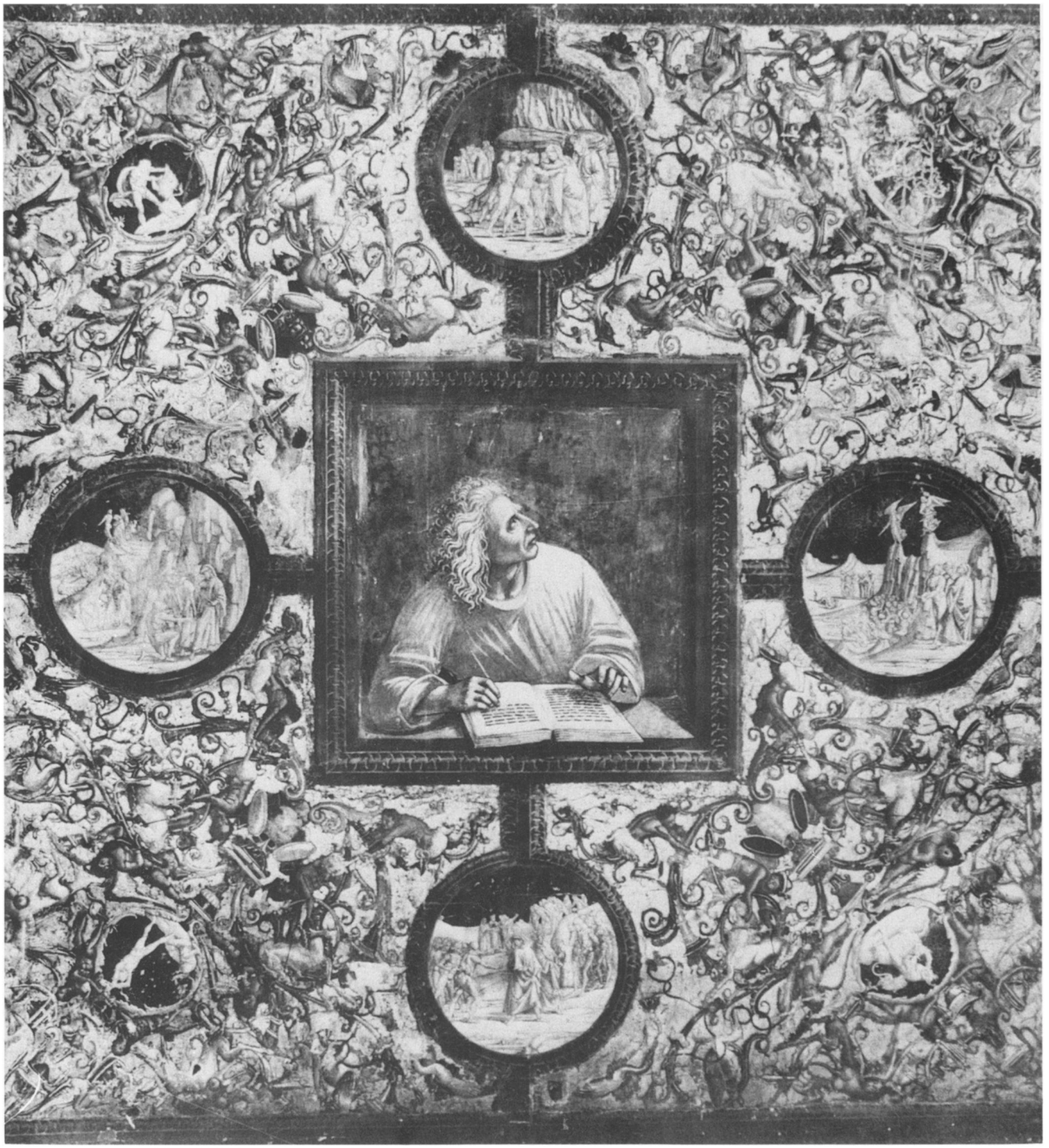
c—Ceres searches for Proserpina (*p.* 79)

d—Pluto in Hades (*p.* 79)

a–d: Details of Pl. 23e

a–e: Signorelli, Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova

Signorelli, Dante with scenes from the *Purgatorio*. Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova (*p.* 74)



Signorelli, St John the Evangelist with scenes from the *Purgatorio*. Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova (*pp.* 74, 78, 82)