Reading Raphael: *The School of Athens* and Its Pre-Text

Glenn W. Most

At least since the winter of 1786, when Goethe stood in the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican and struggled to decipher the so-called *School of Athens* (1509–10) as though he were trying "to study Homer in a partially obliterated, damaged manuscript," the question of how this painting is to be understood has often been formulated in terms of whether, and if so how, it is to be *read*. The aesthetic appeal of the elegance and vivacity of its colors and forms stands in remarkable tension with the cognitive challenge the figures and their dramatic activity seem to pose. Enjoying

The first version of this paper was delivered as a brief talk at a symposium at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin in May 1994. In the following months, I discussed these matters with a number of friends who expressed varying degrees of agreement and greatly helped to clarify my thinking; I cannot name them all here but am grateful to all of them. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Professor Matthias Winner of the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, who kindly invited me to discuss my ideas with him on 24 January 1995 and encouraged me to continue along this line of interpretation, to Dr. Paul Taylor of the Warburg Institute in London for his trenchant criticisms of an earlier version, and to Professor Arnold Nesselrath of the Vatican museums, who permitted me to inspect the fresco from the scaffolding during its restoration on 24 February 1996. A fuller version of this article will be published in German by Fischer Verlag (Frankfurt) in 1997. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

1. On 7 November 1786, Goethe wrote:

Die Loggien von Raffael und die großen Gemälde der Schule von Athen etc. hab' ich nur erst einmal gesehen, und da ist's, als wenn man den Homer aus einer zum Teil verlorenen beschädigten Handschrift herausstudieren sollte. Das Vergnügen des ersten Eindrucks ist unvollkommen, nur wenn man nach und nach alles recht durchgesehen und studiert hat, wird der Genuß ganz. (So far I have seen the loggias
the fresco's beauty seems not to be enough; instead it seems to invite us
to try to understand it by reading it as an enigma we are supposed to
solve. Who are these men, and just what is it they are doing? Must we be
able to name them all? If not, how can we tell apart the ones we are
supposed to be able to identify from their nameless companions? Does
this representation of philosophers have a specific philosophical message,
and if so what is it? These are only some of the questions this painting
raises, questions whose importance and implications reach far beyond the
fresco itself. In the present article I can touch upon only a few of them.

1. Representing Philosophy

How can an artist represent pictorially an intellectual activity like
philosophy? In The School of Athens, Raphael chooses to do so by depicting
the manifold set of ratiocinative and discursive activities performed on a
sunny day in a splendid building by a large number of adult male philoso-
phers (see insert). The fifty-eight figures who occupy this architectural
space impressive for its grandeur, luxury, and sobriety are all busily doing
precisely what philosophers always do when they are acting as philoso-
phers: they are reading, writing, lecturing, arguing, demonstrating, ques-
tioning, listening, pondering, admiring, doubting. If this seems to us a
self-evident choice, it is only because Raphael's image has embedded itself
so deeply in our visual unconscious. It requires an effort of the historical
imagination to recognize that this was not an inevitable, or even a likely,
way to represent philosophy in the first decade of the sixteenth century—
indeed, that the fundamental conception of The School of Athens is entirely
without precedent in the tradition of European art.

Before Raphael, artists depicted philosophy allegorically, in a tradi-
tion that ultimately goes back to a celebrated passage in The Consolation of
Philosophy in which Dame Philosophy appears to Boethius as a majestic
woman holding books and a scepter and wearing clothes embroidered

of Raphael and the great paintings of the School of Athens etc. only once, and it is
as though one were supposed to study Homer in a partially obliterated, damaged
manuscript. The pleasure of the first impression is incomplete, the delight only be-
comes whole when one has gradually examined and studied everything.) [Johann
Wolfgang von Goethe, Die Italienische Reise: Die Annalen, vol. 11 of Gedenkausgabe der
Werke, Briefe, und Gespräche, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zurich, 1950), pp. 144–45]

Glenn W. Most is professor of classics at Heidelberg University and
in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. He
has written widely about ancient and modern poetry and philosophy and
about the classical tradition and the history of classical scholarship.
with Greek letters and a staircase. This tradition tends to be associated with, to influence, and to be influenced in turn by two other traditions that likewise derive ultimately from specific late ancient Latin texts: representations of the seven liberal arts, which can be traced back to Martianus Capella's *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury,* and representations of the virtues and vices, which come out of Prudentius's *Psychomachia.* The remarkable grammatical fact that abstract nouns in Greek and Latin tend to have the feminine gender meant that allegorical personifications of these concepts inevitably took on the female sex, and artistic representations of philosophy and of the related concepts traditionally assumed one or the other of two forms. Either artists confined themselves to depicting the female personification in question—after all, it was she who signified the abstract idea, and for a philosophical realist this possessed a far higher degree of reality than any merely human being. Or she could be shown together with one or more male exponents especially associated with her. Thus Dame Philosophy often appears together with Boethius; as many as four philosophers might be


4. See Prudentius, *Psychomachia,* ll. 22–39 (on *fides* vs. *vetus cultura deorum*), ll. 40–108 (on *publicitas* vs. *libido*), ll. 109–77 (on *patientia* vs. *ira*), ll. 178–309 (on *superbia* vs. *mens humilis* and *spes*), ll. 310–453 (on *luxuria* vs. *sobrietas*), ll. 454–624 (on *avaritia* vs. *ratio* and *operatio*), and ll. 642–892 (on *concordia* vs. *discordia,* or *haeresis*).


6. See Courcelle, "Le Dialogue entre Boèce et Philosophie," *ibid.*, pp. 81–89. As early as late antiquity, Roman sarcophagi sometimes represented Socrates or other philosophers in the close company of Sophia; see L. D. Ettlinger, *Muses and Liberal Arts: Two Miniature..."
depicted, though this is very rare; or Dame Philosophy could be replaced by St. Thomas Aquinas. So, too, medieval depictions of the seven liberal arts often combine one female personification with one or more famous male exponents. Sometimes, indeed, we find combinations of the two traditions: above all in the Horst cup, in which Dame Philosophy, seated on a throne in the center, is flanked by Socrates and Plato, while the rim contains the male exponents of the seven liberal arts (fig. 2), and in a twelfth-century manuscript illumination of Herrad of Landsberg's *Hortus deliciarum*, in which Socrates and Plato are seated under the enthroned "Philosophia" in the center, and all three are surrounded by the seven liberally artistic dames (fig. 3). The frontispiece of Gregorius Reisch's popular encyclopedic handbook of 1504, *Margarita philosophica*, proves that this tradition was still quite alive in Raphael's lifetime; it shows Boethius's Dame Philosophy and at her feet the seven dames of the liberal arts, with Aristotle and Seneca in the bottom corners representing, respectively, natural philosophy and moral philosophy (fig. 4).

In what relation does Raphael's fresco stand to these artistic traditions? On the vault immediately above each of the four walls of the Stanzella Segnatura there is a tondo depicting a majestic female figure seated on a throne; the one above *The School of Athens* is holding two books entitled *Moralis* and *Naturlis* while beside her two heroic children lift the heavy labels "Causarum" and "Cognitio" (fig. 5). This figure is evidently

7. A mid-fourteenth-century Italian manuscript shows Philosophy together with the figures of "Aristotiles perypatheticus," "Plato metaphysis," a figure who may be Socrates, and "Seneca moralis" (quoted in Raymond Klibansky, The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages [London, 1939], pl. 4).
8. This is the case in a fourteenth-century painting in Santa Caterina in Pisa formerly attributed to Francesco Traini, in which St. Thomas Aquinas is surrounded by Aristotle and Plato, each of whom shows him a book. That this painting was still admired and influential in the quattrocento is proven by Benozzo Gozzoli's *Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas*, in the Louvre. In Filippino Lippi's *The Vocation of St. Thomas*, in the Caraffa chapel in Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, the saint sits enthroned in the center above four allegorical women, identified by attributes and inscriptions, who represent Philosophy and Theology to his right and Dialectic and Grammar to his left; in the left and right foreground are male heresiarchs refuted by St. Thomas and portraits of contemporaries.
9. For example, in the sculptures on the west portal of the cathedral in Chartres and in the fresco of the Spanish chapel in Santa Maria Novella in Florence, painted around 1355 by Andrea Bonaiuti and his assistants. A link with *The School of Athens* was first suggested by Jacob Burckhardt, Der Cicerone: Eine Anleitung zum Genuss der Kunstwerke italens, 2 vols. (Basel, 1959), 2:273.
10. See Courcelle, *La Consolation de Philosophie dans la tradition littéraire*, fig. 23.
11. See ibid., fig. 25.
a traditional allegory designating Dame Philosophy. Since Anton Springer’s pioneering study of 1883, a number of important scholars, most notably Julius von Schlosser and E. H. Gombrich, have interpreted Raphael’s tondo and wall fresco as a direct continuation of the medieval traditions of allegorical representations of philosophy and the seven liberal arts.12 In


particular they have emphasized the striking formal and thematic analogies between Raphael's frescoes on the one hand and, on the other, Perugino's depiction of the virtues and their human representatives in the Collegio del Cambio in Perugia and above all Pinturicchio's depictions of the liberal arts, painted only fifteen years earlier in the Appartamento
Borgia directly below the Stanza della Segnatura (fig. 6). Pinturicchio placed in the middle background of each painting a regal female figure on a throne who represents allegorically the particular art and in the foreground on both sides seven to nine nameless male figures whose attributes and activities show that they are practitioners of that art; he dif-

fers from his medieval predecessors merely by naturalizing the locale and multiplying and individualizing the human exponents. In Springer's words, "from this mode of representation it was only a small step to the complete exclusion of the allegorical figures from the circle of the real representatives of the arts and sciences. Raphael took this step."¹⁴

Raphael's decision to paint Dame Philosophy at all and to locate her above her human adepts renders his allusion to these earlier traditions obvious. But in his conception of the work as a whole, he is not so much continuing these traditions as breaking radically with them.¹⁵ This will

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¹⁴. Springer, "Raffaels 'Schule von Athen,'" p. 55.
¹⁵. See Burckhardt, Der Cicerone, 2:273–74.
become clear if we consider first the question of the seven liberal arts and then the relation between the female personification and the male exponents.

Some of the figures shown in The School of Athens can easily be interpreted as practitioners of some of the seven liberal arts. A geometer and an astronomer are prominently displayed in the right foreground; the former even bears a strong resemblance to one of the figures in Pinturicchio’s painting of Geometry in the Appartamento Borgia (see fig. 6). If we wish, we can also locate arithmetic and music in the tablet held up for Pythagoras in the left foreground—though it is odd that, in a painting with almost sixty figures and only seven liberal arts to distribute amongst them, one figure has to serve for two arts. But the other liberal arts cannot be satisfactorily assigned to the remaining figures. Where are grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric? Various suggestions have been made; all are artificial and arbitrary. Some scholars have tried to locate grammar in the group at the extreme left foreground, either because the old man is carrying a child or because the young man writing in the book is wearing a garland.16 Yet the baby is too young to be learning how to read, garlands

are not specific to grammar, and the young man is writing in his book, like so many others in this fresco, not teaching others how to read it. Matters are even worse with rhetoric and dialectic. Springer assigned dialectic to Socrates and absurdly substituted physics for rhetoric;\(^{17}\) von Schlosser, substituting logic or “sophistic” for dialectic and assigning it to Socrates’ group, had to identify Plato and Aristotle with rhetoric.\(^{18}\) Others have identified the rhetorician as the silent, huddled figure added later in the left center foreground\(^ {19}\) or have assigned dialectic to Socrates and rhetoric to the figures in the right background—for no better reason than that otherwise the rhetoricians would be missing.\(^ {20}\) Typically, André Chastel declined to trouble his readers with the minutiae of precise identifications; more rigorously, Gombrich acknowledged all the difficulties of identification but nonetheless insisted that the seven liberal arts were the tradition from which Raphael was drawing.\(^ {21}\) In fact, though, it is an essential feature of that tradition that all seven liberal arts be exhaustively and unambiguously identifiable. If Raphael’s intention was to portray the seven liberal arts, he was evidently so incompetent that to this day his intention could not be understood clearly and unmistakably. Hence this could not have been his intention.

What of the relation between Raphael’s frescoes and the tradition of allegorical representations of philosophy? The woman in Raphael’s tondo, enthroned just above a group of male practitioners of philosophy, is certainly a Renaissance avatar of Boethius’s Dame Philosophy. But Raphael violates the allegorical tradition with four radical innovations.\(^ {22}\) First and most important, the tradition had always placed the personification and the exponents within the frame of a single image, but Raphael splits the two kinds of figures into two discrete images with two separate frames that do not even directly touch each other. Second, the tradition


17. See Springer, “Raffaello ‘Schule von Athen,’” pp. 96–98 and Raffaello und Michelangelo, 1:255. However, physics was never one of the seven liberal arts, while rhetoric always was, and Springer must admit that none of the figures in the right background he assigns to physics bears any attribute or performs any action to make us think of that discipline.


19. See Klaczko, Rome et la Renaissance—essais et esquisses—Jules II, pp. 243–45. This seems an odd choice for rhetoric, given that this is one of the very few characters in the whole fresco who is saying nothing.


22. Some of these differences are acknowledged by Springer, “Raffaels ‘Schule von Athen,’” pp. 92–93.
had always located the personification and the exponents along the same plane, but Raphael places the personification upon the horizontal plane of the vault and the exponents upon the vertical plane of the wall. Third, the tradition had always made the personification larger than the exponents, usually much more so—after all, she was more real and more important than they. But several of Raphael’s philosophers seem at least as large as his Dame Philosophy, and the area covered by The School of Athens is more than fifteen times larger than that of the tondo.23 Moreover, the tondo on the vault is at least 8.5 meters away from the floor and hence is situated at a much greater distance from the viewer than the human figures in The School of Athens are, so that it seems even less large in comparison to them than it actually is. Fourth, the tradition had always assigned only a small number of exponents to each of the allegorical personifications—usually one or two in the Middle Ages and only three to nine in Perugino and Pinturicchio—and had made the personification at least as interesting visually as the exponents. But Raphael’s The School of Athens contains almost sixty human figures, all highly individualized in their appearance and gestures and intensely and dramatically concentrated upon their activities; whereas his Dame Philosophy, all alone with the two boys, is merely sitting in a relaxed way glancing upwards.

Had Raphael wished simply to continue earlier pictorial traditions, the shape of the wall available to him in the Stanza della Segnatura would have lent itself easily to the creation of a single image combining one large female personification with a small number of male exponents similar to Pinturicchio’s depictions of the seven liberal arts; Raphael’s symmetrically shaped Disputa on the opposite wall gives in its multilevel composition an idea of how such a traditional conception might have been worked out (fig. 7). As it is, however, Raphael chose to refer to these traditions but apparently only so that he would leave no doubt that he was breaking fundamentally with them. He refuses to do without allegory altogether,24 but he minimizes it as far as possible so as to draw our attention to a quite

23. The diameter of the tondo is around 1.8 meters (according to Pierluigi de Vecchi, “Catalogo delle opere,” in L’opera completa di Raffaello, ed. Michele Prisco and de Vecchi [Milan, 1966], p. 101), so its area is around 2.5 square meters. The base of The School of Athens is 8.14 meters and its height is 5.77 meters (according to Deoclecio Redig de Campos, Raffaello nelle stanze [Florence, 1983], p. 201), so its area is around 39 square meters. The relevant illustrations in Gombrich, “Raphael’s Stanza della Segnatura and the Nature of Its Symbolism,” figs. 64–65, 66–67, 68–69, and 70–71, are quite misleading, for they make the tondi seem far larger in comparison to the wall frescoes than they actually are. The ratio of the diameter of the former to the base of the latter in Gombrich is 1 to 2.4, but the ratio in reality is 1 to 4.5.

Fig. 7.—Raphael, *Disputation*. Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura, ca. 1509.
different, secular vision of philosophy as essentially constituted by the living practice of real human philosophers. In so doing, Raphael severed the umbilical cord linking two planes of reality, which his predecessors had always scrupulously preserved, and thereby he brought to life a new, autonomous artistic creature.

2. The School of Athens and Its Pre-Text

How did Raphael come up with the idea of representing ancient philosophy in this novel way? The secularization and humanization of traditional artistic motifs is characteristic of all his art, as of that of many of his contemporaries, and shortly before he painted The School of Athens he had experimented with the depiction of groups of intellectuals engaged in lively debate in the lower register of the Disputa. To be sure, the genesis of any great work of art, like that of any human action whatsoever, cannot be entirely explained; what is more, the state of evidence for determining the origins of a fresco painted almost five centuries ago is highly lacunose. Nevertheless, an analysis of the composition of The School of Athens may shed new light on its conception; indeed, the decisive question may turn out to be not so much why Raphael represented Philosophy in terms of philosophers but why he decided to represent those philosophers in precisely the way he did. For the fifty-eight figures in Raphael’s fresco are not distributed at random in the grand space in which we encounter them. They are carefully organized into three basic groups.25

At the center stands a symmetrical pair of figures (Plato and Aristotle). Each one holds a thick folio in his left hand against his left hip—these books are the only ones in the whole wall fresco that bear titles (evidently they are meant to correspond to the two tomes in the tondo)—and each one gestures conspicuously with his right hand. Each one looks toward the other; this is the only dialogue in the whole painting in which

25. Still useful for their descriptions of the composition are Springer, “Raffaels ‘Schule von Athen,’” and Trendelenburg, “Raffaels ‘Schule von Athen.’” The compositional pattern analyzed here is certainly not the only one that organizes this painting, but it seems to be the most basic and encompassing one. Another important compositional principle of this fresco, as of other paintings by Raphael, is the artist’s tendency to work from left to right. In Pythagoras’s group, there are four young males of increasing age arranged from left to right (the baby at the extreme left, the boy looking at us from behind the Arab, the youth holding the tablet, and the beautiful young man in white) and three stone blocks of increasing size along the floor from left to right (under Pythagoras’s foot, under the man standing and looking at him while pointing to an open book, and beside the meditative figure seated near the center). So, too, the only figures who can be securely named appear in chronological order from left to right: Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Diogenes, Ptolemy, and Raphael. This left-to-right directionality makes it all the more tempting to “read” the fresco.
two interlocutors speak and look only at each other. The parallelism and complementarity of this central pair is echoed and deepened by the figures who surround them in two rows in straight lines on their left and right and who follow this central dialogue with passionate intensity and even involuntary astonishment, thereby programming our own reaction. Beside each row, another pair of characters, here too one older and one younger, is moving along the same axis as the central pair. The pair on our right moves backward into the depths of the building, while the one on our left moves forward toward us like the central pair. The circularity of their movement and the attentive disposition of the two lines around the gracefully advancing central pair are reminiscent of the evolutions of a chorus around its leaders.\textsuperscript{26} The axial symmetry of this central arrangement is confirmed and continued on both sides in a series of other characters, who are almost all located at the same level, on the top step, on the floor of the building. On our left, the forward movement of the left circumambulating pair is prolonged into one group of nine figures made up of six closely packed together (Socrates and his listeners) and then three at some distance; on our right, the backward motion of the right circumambulating pair is again followed by nine figures, one group of three extending downward toward us onto the steps (Diogenes and two others) and six others spaced out along the main floor toward the right. The symmetrical disposition of these two extensions of the central group is emphasized by the balance of two other figures: near the extreme left one youth, his head turned away from us over his shoulder, comes running onto the scene just as at the extreme right another youth, his head turned toward us over his shoulder, is hastily rushing off.

In the right foreground Raphael has placed a second group of figures, entirely separate from the first group. The isolation of this second group is not only a matter of location—the figures are all on the lowest level to the extreme right—but also of gesture and posture: no figure outside this group takes any notice of its existence;\textsuperscript{27} no figure inside the group seems aware of the other characters in the scene; all the figures within the group are involved only with others within the same group; and the two at the extreme left and the two at the extreme right face inwards, sealing this group’s autonomy. This group too is made up of nine figures, divided into five crouching figures and four standing ones. The erect pair on the right are portraits of Raphael himself and of a colleague; the other two hold up spheres—one (Ptolemy) terrestrial, the other celestial—so conspicuously that they are fully visible for the other

\textsuperscript{26} Compare Springer, “Raffaels ‘Schule von Athen,’” p. 62.

\textsuperscript{27} The old, bearded man in the reddish-brown cloak standing alone on the steps above this group might erroneously be thought to be looking and pointing down toward it. His hand is not pointing, however, but merely holding his cloak, and close inspection of the fresco in February 1996 revealed that he is looking not downward at Ptolemy’s group (nor, as might also be thought, is he blind), but instead sideways in the direction of Diogenes.
figures and for us. The other five are intensely engaged in the solution of a geometrical problem and provide a limpid model of the successful transmission of knowledge. The teacher spares no pains in kneeling uncomfortably so that the tablet upon which he has placed his compass can be entirely visible to the four students who are watching his demonstration, and these latter present four successive steps in the process of understanding, from pained bafflement to wild surmise to hopeful questioning to satisfied certainty.28

In obvious ways the last group (that of Pythagoras), in the near foreground on our left, balances the second one on our right.29 This group too, like the previous one, has no contact with any of the outside figures, seems to be concerned only with itself, and is bracketed at its extremities by figures who look inwards into the group. It too is divided into two subgroups, with its outer set less numerous than its inner one. But in other regards this third group could not present a more striking contrast with the second one. If the group in the right foreground embodies the transparency of the transmission of knowledge—the globes are held up for all to see, the tablet is laid out where the students can easily follow their teacher’s demonstration—the group on the left suggests instead the urgent but unsuccessful attempt to penetrate a resolute secretiveness. Its tablet illustrating Pythagorean number and musical theory is being displayed only to Pythagoras,30 the two men crouching behind him strain to peer over his shoulder at what he is writing,31 and the books depicted reveal nothing of their contents.32 The same secrecy is implied by the subgroup at the extreme left, where, instead of an open conversation


31. The precise meaning of these figures’ gestures is hard to determine, but close inspection of the fresco in February 1996 suggested that the youth holding the tablet is looking tentatively at the Arab while the Arab is staring at him wrathfully and not just with fierce concentration. If so, then it may be suggested that the youth is making sure that the Arab cannot see the tablet and that the Arab is angry with him for just this reason.

between equal partners on objects we can immediately identify (as at the far right), we see one central figure busy writing into a book—what, precisely, we can have no idea—while three others admire him. The sense of mystery is deepened by the beautiful young man, dressed all in white, who stands near Pythagoras and stares directly at us.

Whence did Raphael get the idea for arranging his philosophers in just this way? He might, of course, have simply invented it ex nihilo—we dare not underestimate his creativity, and if we fail to find any other source we just may have to fall back upon this answer in the end. What about possible pictorial sources? The only candidate suggested by scholars is Lorenzo Ghiberti’s depiction of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon on the bottom-right panel of the Porta del Paradiso in the Baptisterium of Florence, whose striking similarity to Raphael’s fresco has often been noted since the middle of the nineteenth century (fig. 8).33

Here as well two central figures are surrounded by various groups at different levels on the stairs and floors of a noble edifice with lofty arches. But the similarity between the two images should not be exaggerated. Ghiberti’s panel is an ingenious adaptation of the traditional compositional pattern of ceremonial presentations of central regal figures to their admiring courtly entourage, found in countless depictions of Mary and baby Jesus, the coronation of the Virgin, and so on. Typically, the central figure or figures are seated on a throne in an apse and are surrounded on the left and right by two groups of admirers; if the artist chooses to enhance the central figures’ majesty by elevating their throne a few steps above our ordinary, mortal level, the admiring crowd will end up being distributed not only horizontally but also vertically. There are many quattrocento versions of this compositional scheme—34 indeed, Raphael himself made use of it in order elegantly to overcome awkward spatial constraints in his Parnassus and Mass of Bolsena. In all these paintings, a focus upon the central figures unifies the composition by directing the glance of all or almost all of the members of the various parts of its admir-


34. Examples of the vertical distribution of admirers include Fra Angelico’s two portrayals of the coronation of the Virgin, in the Louvre and in the Uffizi (in the latter the elevation is achieved not by steps but by divine prestidigitation), and in Domenico Ghirlandaio’s Virgin and Child with Angels and Saints in the Uffizi and Virgin and Child with Saints in the Duomo of Lucca (where the entourage is reduced to the minimum of four figures) and in his The Sacrifice of Zachary in the Temple at Santa Maria Novella in Florence (where the figures are distributed with a savvy asymmetry). Pinturicchio’s paintings in the Libreria Piccolomini of the Duomo of Siena, especially The Canonization of Saint Catherine of Siena and
ing audience (and hence ours as well) toward a central epiphany. But in *The School of Athens* the courtly admiration for the central pair of Plato and Aristotle is restricted to the immediate retinue of the chorus of listeners surrounding them, while the other groups in the left and right foreground take no interest whatsoever in the proceedings in the central section; they are autonomous groups, not admirers of the central one.35

The *Coronation of Pius III*, show the vitality of this compositional tradition in the very same years when Raphael was working on *The School of Athens*.

35. Moreover, the architecture of the buildings in Ghiberti and Raphael is quite different. Raphael's hall is not a Gothic construction divided into one central nave and two lateral ones, its dome is not supported by slender groups of columns, and, above all, the space it represents is not enclosed by an external wall. Compare Christian Hülsen, "Die Halle in Raffaels 'Schule von Athen,'" *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 4 (1911): 229–36, esp. pp. 231–32.
A number of scholars have already suggested that Raphael's source might have been a written text. After all, books play a strikingly conspicuous role in this painting—at least eleven are depicted. 36 Whether or not, as Franz Wickhoff has plausibly suggested, the Stanza della Segnatura was intended to serve as Pope Julius II's private library, it is certain that, for the Renaissance, Greek philosophy existed essentially not only as specific doctrines and systems but above all in the form of numerous bulky manuscripts and a few hefty printed editions. 37 For a Renaissance painter or scholar who wanted to find out what Greek philosophers engaged in their characteristic occupations had looked like, nothing would have been more natural than to turn for such information to one of these books. But which one? The search for such a book goes back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, when Johann David Passavant identified Diogenes Laertius as the source for Raphael's fresco. 38 But nowhere does Diogenes Laertius, nor any other author proposed hitherto, provide anything comparable to Raphael's highly dramatic philosophical congress. 39 Nowhere do we find a scene like this: in a great hall, we have come upon a large number of philosophers and their disciples fully immersed in their characteristic occupations: a first, largest group organized symmetrically like a silent chorus around a central pair of discoursing figures; a second, independent, smaller group devoted to solving problems and to matters terrestrial and celestial; and a third, independent, smaller group whose intellectual content is hard to ascertain despite concerted efforts to do so, and that also includes a strikingly beautiful young man.

36. Books are held by Plato (Timeo); Aristotle (Etica); the seated youth to the right of the central chorus; Diogenes; the brooding man seated in the center-left foreground; the standing man behind him staring at Pythagoras; Pythagoras himself; the old man peering over his right shoulder; the man crowned with leaves standing behind him; and the rushing youth near the left edge, who carries both a codex and a roll. The importance of books in the fresco is noted by Lars Vissing, "Le Débordement du sens: L'École d'Athènes de Raphaël," Analecta Romana Instituti Danici 8 (1977): 167–74, esp. p. 171, and Wickhoff, "Die Bibliothek Julius' II," p. 53.


38. See Johann David Passavant, Rafael von Urbino und sein Vater Giovanni Santi, 3 vols. (1839; Leipzig, 1858), 2:102.

Yet there is such a text, one that apparently has until now never been brought into connection with *The School of Athens*. Consider the following passage, abstracting from the names of the individuals and concentrating instead upon their organization, their activities, and their interrelations:

When we came in we found Protagoras walking in the colonnade, and ranged on one side of him were Callias the son of Hipponicus and his half-brother Paralus the son of Pericles and Charmides the son of Glaucon, and on the other Pericles’ other son Xanthippus and Philippides the son of Philomelus and Antimoerus of Mende, who has the highest reputation of any of Protagoras’ pupils and is studying with him professionally, with a view to becoming a sophist. Those who were following them listening to the conversation seemed mostly to be foreigners—Protagoras collects them from every city he passes through, charming them with his voice like Orpheus, and they follow the sound of his voice quite spellbound—but there were some Athenians in the procession too. I was absolutely delighted by this procession, to see how careful they were that nobody ever got in Protagoras’ way, but whenever he and his companions turned round, those followers of his turned smartly outwards in formation to left and right, wheeled round and so every time formed up in perfect order behind him.

“And after him I recognized,” as Homer says, Hippias of Elis, sitting on a throne in the opposite colonnade. Around him were sitting on benches Eryximachus the son of Acumenus and Phaedrus from Myrminus and Andron the son of Androtion and a number of foreigners, fellow citizens of Hippias and others. They seemed to be asking Hippias astronomical questions about nature and celestial phenomena, and he was sitting on his throne giving a detailed decision on every question.

“And then I saw Tantalus too,” for Prodicus of Ceos was also in town. He was in a room which Hipponicus previously used as a storeroom, but now because of the number of visitors Callias had cleared it out too and turned it into a guest-room. Prodicus was still in bed, wrapped up in a great many sheepskins and blankets, as far as I could see. On the beds next to his sat Pausanias from Cerameis, and with him a young lad, a fine boy in my opinion, and certainly very fine-looking. I think I heard that his name was Agathon, and I shouldn’t be surprised if Pausanias were in love with him. There was that lad, and the two Adeimantuses, the son of Cepis and the son of Leucolophides, and there seemed to be some others; but I couldn’t catch from outside what they were talking about, though I was very eager to hear Prodicus—for I think that he is a wonderful man, and very learned—but his deep voice made such a booming noise in the room that the words themselves were indistinct.40

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This passage occurs near the beginning of Plato's *Protagoras*. Young Hippocrates has excitedly awakened Socrates early in the morning because the great sophist Protagoras has come to Athens and is staying in the house of Callias, one of the wealthiest men in the city. Socrates and Hippocrates set off for "this, the greatest and most magnificent house" of Athens and after passing the doorkeeper they light upon the scene described here.41 In a great hall, they have come upon a large number of sophists and their disciples fully immersed in their characteristic occupations: a first, largest group organized symmetrically like a silent chorus around a central discoursing figure; a second, independent, smaller group devoted to solving problems and to matters natural and celestial; and a third, independent, smaller group whose intellectual content is hard to ascertain despite concerted efforts to do so, and that also includes a strikingly beautiful young man.

In its basic conception and in many details, Plato's text is strikingly similar to Raphael's painting, despite the evident differences in the two media involved. The luxurious hall, the theatrical immersion of the figures in their typical activities,42 and the carefree anachronism that juxtaposes celebrities to demonstrate affinities and affiliations without regard to historical probability are all the same.43 Socrates is of course no longer the narrator (how could a narrator have possibly been represented in this fresco?) but instead is placed in a position of special prominence, to the left of the chorus surrounding Plato and Aristotle.44

But beyond such individual details, both the text and the fresco share the same fundamental division into three groups and the same thematic characterization of all three. In Plato, the first group is composed of listeners who symmetrically flank and follow a single speaker, Protagoras, and wheel about as a chorus wherever he moves. In Raphael, the emphatic symmetry of the Platonic text is not only represented by the bipartite distribution of the listeners but has now resulted in the duplication of the central figure; no longer Protagoras alone, but now Plato and

41. Ibid., p. 30, 337D.
42. For the theatrical quality of Raphael's fresco, see for example Vissing, "Le Débordement du sens," p. 168. The theatricality of the Platonic scene—for more than the length of a whole Stephanus page, Socrates and Hippocrates stand motionless and silently observe these people, none of whom pays the slightest attention to the two spectators—was already noted in antiquity; see Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 11.506F.
43. See Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 5.218B–E.
44. If we wish to go further, we may be tempted to identify the soldier in Socrates' group with Alcibiades, who turns up in the *Protagoras* in the lines immediately following this passage, 316A. The identification of this figure in the fresco as Alcibiades is traditional in Raphael scholarship and goes back at least to Bellori; see Giovanni Bellori, "Descrizione delle quattro Immagini nella Camera della Segnatura in Vaticano," in *Della vita e pitture di Raffaello di Urbino per Vasari, Bellori, e Missirini* (Milan, 1825), pp. 50–101, esp. p. 86. Indeed, thinking of this scene in the Platonic dialogue we might even wish to identify the excited youth rushing in toward Socrates' group as Hippocrates.
Aristotle together represent the central focus. Evidently, Plato and Aristotle are being thought of as the two complementary alternatives that in their harmonious opposition describe the essence of all Greek philosophy: physics and moral philosophy, the *Timeo* and the *Etica*, the finger pointing up and the open outstretched hand, or (in the titles of the two books Dame Philosophy is holding) *Naturalis* and *Moralis*.\(^\text{45}\) Though there are medieval artistic precedents for just this juxtaposition, especially in the tradition of the triumph of St. Thomas, it was in the Italian Renaissance in particular that it became a philosophical commonplace, expressed—sometimes polemically, sometimes harmoniously—above all in the mid-fifteenth century in the dispute among George of Trebizond, Georgius Gemistos Plethon, Cardinal Bessarion, and Teodoro Gaza, and a few decades later in Pico's exuberant eclecticism and in the controversy among Pietro Pomponazzi, Marsilio Ficino, and Agostino Nifo.\(^\text{46}\) Had Raphael followed Plato's text so slavishly as to organize his first group around a single figure, he would have had to privilege exclusively either Plato or Aristotle and to subordinate the other one, thereby falsifying the richness of Greek philosophy and expressing a needlessly provocative partiality. To be sure, many viewers have thought that Raphael grants Plato a subtle hint of superiority over Aristotle; Aristotle is confined to the given world surrounding him, but Plato is pointing upwards beyond the limits of pagan philosophy toward an eventual Christian revelation that he alone can vaguely sense—after all, we are in the Vatican.\(^\text{47}\) But if so, this is only a hint; it is only as a pair that Plato and Aristotle can represent the focus of *The School of Athens*.

For the second group, Raphael has transformed Plato's description of Hippias engaged in answering astronomical questions about nature and the celestial bodies by dividing it into two parts: his geometer is busy solving a problem for the benefit of his four students, while Ptolemy and another figure hold up terrestrial and celestial globes in order to identify a particular field of knowledge for their viewers. Ptolemy wears a crown, for this most eminent representative of ancient geography and astronomy was traditionally confused with the homonymous Egyptian dynasts, but for the reader familiar with Plato's text the royal insignia may have a further point, for Hippias is twice said to be sitting on a throne.

In Plato’s third group, Socrates tries in vain to understand Prodicus’s words, but despite his efforts their meaning remains concealed to him. In Raphael’s fresco, it is Pythagoras’s doctrine that is enticing the pair of


\(^{46}\) For the general philosophical context, see *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, and Eckhard Kessler (Cambridge, 1988).

\(^{47}\) See, for example, Garin, "Raffaello e i filosofi antichi," p. 18.
snoops crouching behind him—which makes perfect sense, for Pythagoras was celebrated for the silence he imposed upon his disciples and the secrecy with which he shrouded his doctrines. No other ancient philosopher could more aptly have suggested the theme of the concealment of wisdom. And Raphael’s youth in white, whose great beauty, direct glance, clothes’ coloring, and anomalous position particularly strike the viewer, is reminiscent of the one youth in the Platonic scene upon whose beauty Socrates lingers lovingly; if so, we might be tempted to name him Agathon.

3. From Plato to Raphael

Can these similarities be attributed to chance? I do not think it possible definitively to refute anyone one who would insist upon explaining them away in these terms. But those, like myself, to whom they seem much too extensive and too detailed to be the effect of mere chance are confronted with a series of interesting and difficult questions. For in Raphael’s time, Plato was not a Greek author but a Latin one. The only access most people had to the Protagoras in the first decade of the sixteenth century was the Latin translation that Ficino included in his version of Plato’s collected works first published around 1484—by contrast, the editio princeps of Plato in Greek did not appear until 1513. In Ficino’s stately Latin, the wry ironic vigor of the Greek text becomes weightier and more serious. Moving from the sprightly Greek text (or


50. Venice, 1513: Aldus Manutius, with Marcus Musurus.

51. For comparison, I quote the same passage from Plato, Opera Omnia ex Graeco a Marsilio Ficino in Latino traducta cum argumentis Marsili Ficini (Venice, 1556), p. 159:

Ingredi, Protagoram offendidus in vestibulo porticus deambulantem. Sequebantur eum multi, hinc quidem Callias Hipponici filius, & germanus eius ex matre Paralus Pericle natus, & Charmides Glaconis: inde verò alter Pericles filius Xanthippus, & Philippides Philemeli, & Ancimirus Mendeus, qui inter omnes Protagorae auditores insignior habebatur, discetabque ea mente facultatem illam, ut & ipse sophista futurus eadem quandoque profiteretur. À tergo praeterea sequebantur ali auscultantes
an accurate English translation) to the grave dignity of Raphael’s fresco involves a considerable leap in tone, but the step from Ficino’s translation to the fresco is much smaller. Moreover, Ficino may have not only provided the pre-text to Raphael’s fresco; he may also have supplied an important hint toward the transformation of this scene into a picture, for in the part of his prefatory summary of the *Protagoras* dedicated to this passage he declared, “then like a painter he sets the pomp and vanity of the sophists before our eyes.”\(^{52}\) In these words Ficino is praising Plato for what the rhetorical tradition termed *enargeia*, the author’s skill in making his readers visualize what he describes so vividly that it affects their imagination almost in the way that a painter does.\(^{53}\) But at the same time he might be thought to have been issuing a challenge to contemporary painters to try to create in their own medium a work of art that could rival Plato’s. Only Raphael seems to have met this challenge.

Could he have done so alone? If we assume that there is indeed some connection between Plato’s text and Raphael’s fresco, was Raphael solely responsible for transforming the one into the other? Surely not. Of course, Ficino was linked to the literary and philosophical culture of Urbino that flourished under Federigo of Montefeltro and of which Rapha-

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52. “Mox quasi pictor Sophistarum fastum, vanitatemque ante oculos ponit” (ibid., p. 155).

el’s father was a prominent member, and during his brief stay in Florence Raphael might well have had contact with Neoplatonic circles there. But Federigo died a year before Raphael was born, and the painter’s childhood in Urbino coincided with the town’s rapid political and cultural decline; nor has any concrete evidence ever been found to link Raphael with Florentine Neoplatonism. Raphael himself was not a learned man—he knew no Greek, and his grasp of Latin was so tenuous that he had to read Vitruvius in the Italian translation Marco Fabio Calvo prepared for him. If Raphael could have read the Protagoras himself, he would surely not have needed Ficino’s remark to recognize this scene’s extraordinary visual possibilities. But most likely he could not. Moreover, it is evident that not one but two kinds of “translations” were necessary to transform that text into this image. On the one hand, a brilliant pictorial imagination had to find compelling visual equivalents for the textual signals in the Protagoras—and who could have done this better than Raphael? But, on the other hand, profound philosophical scholarship was also necessary if the specific contents of the Platonic scene were to be translated into their equivalents in the history of Greek philosophy. For Raphael shows us neither Protagoras nor Hippas nor Prodicus, but Plato and Aristotle and Ptolemy and Pythagoras. To translate Hippias’s astronomy into Ptolemy’s may not have strained ordinary erudition, but to translate the single Protagoras into the complementary pair of Plato and Aristotle required full competence in the contemporary historiography of Greek philosophy, and to see in Socrates’ failure to distinguish Prodicus’s words an opportunity to allude to Pythagoras’s secret doctrines presupposed detailed specialist knowledge. Whose?

To ask this question is to ask who devised the program of The School of Athens. Much about Raphael’s fresco is controversial, but no issue is more so than this one. Raphael’s first biographer, Paolo Giovio, writing before 1527, asserted that he painted the frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura “ad praescriptum Julii Pontificis.” But who mediated between the pope and the painter and worked out the program that the latter was

54. Ficino dedicated his translation of the Politicus first to “Migliore Cresci,” then to Federigo (quoted in Hankins, Plato in the Italian Renaissance, 1:305).
56. The two qualities Socrates ironically attributes to Prodicus—omniscience and godliness—are frequently applied in all seriousness to Pythagoras in the Neoplatonic tradition. On omniscience, see Porphyry, Vita Pythagorica, 1, 30; on godliness, see ibid., 20, and Iamblichus, De vita Pythagorica liber, 1.1.
58. Paolo Giovio, quoted in Raffaello, p. 192.
to fulfill to the satisfaction of the former? 59 Whoever it was must have been a prominent theologian in the court of Pope Julius II and closely associated with the pope himself—for otherwise the pope would hardly have commissioned him to design the program for decorating his private apartments in order to remove any reminders of his hated predecessor, Pope Alexander VI Borgia. He would also have needed to be a highly erudite scholar of ancient Greek philosophy, and presumably an adherent of Platonism—for a Platonic text seems to have provided the inspiration for the whole scene, and the prominent position assigned to Pythagoras recalls the particular importance accorded this philosopher by ancient and Renaissance Neoplatonism.

Many candidates have been proposed or might be thought of as Raphael's adviser during the planning of *The School of Athens*, 60 but the most


60. There are a number of likely but ultimately disappointing candidates. Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) was Raphael's friend and an extremely learned man but spent the years 1506–12 in Urbino and only came to prominence at the papal court under Leo X, together with Jacopo Sadoleto. Battista Casali (1473–1525) was appointed canon of the Lateran by Julius II in 1508 and preached a sermon before the pope in the same year comparing Renaissance Rome to a new Athens and praising the papal library as an image of Plato's Academy (see John W. O'Malley, "The Vatican Library and the Schools of Athens: A Text of Battista Casali, 1508," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 [Fall 1977]: 271–87), but he had no particular competence in philosophy. Baldassarre Castiglione (1478–1529) praised Raphael's plan of Rome in 1519, and a portrait of him by an assistant of Raphael survives, but he had only a limited interest in ancient philosophy, and his prominence at the Vatican postdates the death of Julius II. Sigismondo de' Conti (1432–1512), Julius II's secretary, commissioned Raphael's *Madonna del Foligno*, in which the painter included de' Conti's portrait, but he seems to have been entirely free of philosophical interests. Giovanni Gorizio (ca. 1455–1527), secretary of memorials under Julius II, commissioned Raphael's painting of the prophet Isaiah in the Church of Sant'Agostino in Rome but seems to have had no particular interest or competence in philosophy. Tommaso Inghirami ("Fedra," 1470–1516), appointed librarian of the Vatican by Julius II in 1510, helped with the stage decorations for a production of Plautus's *Poenulus* and designed eighteen allegorical floats for the "festa di Agone," and a portrait of him by Raphael survives, but he seems to have been far more interested in ancient theater than in Greek philosophy. Lodovico Ricchieri ("Rhodiginus," 1469–1525) was a professor of Greek and worked on Plato and Aristotle but never had any connection with the papal court, with Raphael, or with painting and at the time of Raphael's fresco was teaching at Ferrara. Sadoleto (1477–1547) wrote extensively about philosophy, but not until the 1520s and 1530s (see Jacopo Sadoleto, *Phaedrus and Hortensius*, vols. 1 and 2 of *De laudibus philosophiae*), and only became an important figure in the Vatican with the accession of Pope Leo X, who appointed him and Bembo as domestic secretaries of the apostolic secretariat in 1515. Marco Girolamo Vida (ca. 1485–1566) was associated with Raphael later, but from 1505 until 1510 was in Cremona and only thereafter came to Rome. Marco Vigerio (1446–1516), a Franciscan appointed cardinal by Julius II in
likely one, and the only one who fulfills both of these criteria exceptionally well, is Giles of Viterbo (Aegidius Viterbiensis, Egidio Antonini, 1469–1532). On the one hand, Giles was one of the most prominent and theologically influential figures in the court of Julius II, who appointed him vicar general of the Augustinians in 1506 (in 1507, 1511, and 1515 he was elected and then reelected prior general of the same order) and who entrusted him with the opening address for the fifth Lateran Council in 1512. But, on the other hand, Giles was also one of the most eminent Platonists of his age. He visited Ficino in Florence and later praised him in a letter in which he called the rebirth of Platonic philosophy Ficino had brought about a new golden age. His familiarity with the Protagoras is demonstrated by his quotations from it in his own writings and by his

1505, was interested neither in philosophy nor in art. Finally, Tommaso de Vio (Cardinal Cajetan, 1469–1534), a Dominican who became vicar general of his order in 1507 and was master general from 1508–18, was a professor of theology at the University of Rome from 1501–8 but followed Aristotle and Aquinas rather than Plato.


annotations to it in a Plato manuscript he owned. One further aspect of Giles’s Platonism that may well be relevant to The School of Athens is his obsession with Neoplatonic number symbolism, which was attributed especially to Pythagoras and hence fits well with the prominent place accorded this philosopher in Raphael’s fresco.

If one modern scholar could describe Giles as “Julius II’s court theologian” and a Renaissance Platonist could call him “Platonicorum maximus” after Ficino’s death, then Giles was clearly capable of playing the role of Raphael’s adviser. But perhaps we can take one more step and suggest yet another possible connection between views like Giles’s and The School of Athens. This connection is provided by the splendid building in which Raphael’s philosophers are housed.

4. Housing the Philosophy Department

What was Raphael thinking of when he painted this sumptuous hall? He was surely impressed by the ancient Roman baths and palace constructions that were being newly uncovered in his immediate vicinity during these years, and he may well have been influenced by the various


65. Giles’s Historia viginti saeculorum is organized in terms of the first twenty Psalms, for each of which he provides a more or less detailed commentary; in each case, the first section of his commentary is devoted to analyzing the occult powers of the number of the Psalm in question. And his sermon on the four golden ages includes a detailed discussion, lasting twenty manuscript pages, of the mystical significance of the number twelve.


68. To be sure, no surviving evidence directly links Giles with Raphael, and he does not seem ever to have been particularly interested in painting. When Leo X became pope, Giles wrote a letter to him praising the artistic monuments with which his predecessor had embellished Rome and urging him to continue with those great works; here he dwelt at length upon the new Basilica of San Pietro but did not even bother to mention Raphael’s frescoes in the Stanze or Michelangelo’s in the Sistine Chapel; see O’Malley, Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform, p. 136. Garin, “Raffaello e i filosofi antichi,” p. 25 n. 5, sees in this fact evidence against Giles as Raphael’s advisor. Yet not too much weight should be given to Giles’s silence. He was a busy ecclesiastical administrator in a time of upheaval; if the pope asked him to advise Raphael, he could have done so himself quickly and without great effort of thought or delegated the task to others, with a few well-chosen bibliographical indications. Years later, his own involvement in this one painting might have seemed less significant to him than other activities he had been engaged in.

69. On these discoveries, see Rodolfo Amedeo Lanciani, Storia degli scavi di Roma e notizie intorno le collezioni romane di Antichità, ed. Leonello Malvezzi Campeggi, 2 vols. (Rome,
palaces that were being planned and constructed in Rome during this same period and that responded to the ancient ruins in their own way. But beyond these general contexts, numerous scholars have also brought Raphael’s fresco into close connection with two particular buildings.

The first is the new Basilica of San Pietro in the Vatican, which Raphael’s friend and teacher Bramante was planning at this very time. Giorgio Vasari reported that Bramante helped Raphael with the architecture of *The School of Athens* and that Raphael portrayed him in the figure of the geometry, and since Giovanni Bellori it has become conventional to associate Raphael’s noble edifice with Bramante’s plans for the basilica. After all, it is well known that Raphael collaborated closely with Bramante and after the latter’s death in 1514 was entrusted with continuing his work. Moreover, both of these buildings are conceived on the same fundamental pattern, a Greek cross with a central cupola—a pattern Raphael also used when he designed the Church of Sant’Eligio degli Orefici, built in 1516. Finally, close study of Raphael’s fresco has revealed similarities in certain details between his edifice and Bramante’s plan.

Raphael may well have drawn some of his inspiration from Bramante, but in a number of crucial regards Raphael’s building is entirely different from anything that Bramante could have conceived for San Pietro, and it is quite unlikely that he was thinking exclusively or primarily of the future Vatican basilica. First of all, Raphael’s Greek cross is not enclosed within the walls of a church but is entirely opened up to the outside world to the full height of its two visible barrel vaults. Second,
Bramante’s various plans show his unrelenting efforts to find a way to rest a monumental dome upon the fewest and most graceful supports possible, yet the weight of Raphael’s cupola is borne by four massive and evidently solid square supporting structures. Third, Raphael’s edifice, impressive though it is, is in fact far smaller than one would guess; its gallery can be estimated to be only 5.5 meters wide and around 7 meters high, and the whole building is not even a quarter of the size of San Pietro. And finally, Raphael has in fact depicted not one edifice but two, for behind the farther arch of his Greek cross he has placed a single triumphal arch that is evidently discontinuous with the main building and located at some distance from it. Hence Bramante’s plans could not have been Raphael’s sole inspiration.

Eighty years ago, Christian Hülsen pointed out that another building presents a far closer analogy to certain aspects of the hall in Raphael’s The School of Athens than does Bramante’s plan for San Pietro. This is not a Renaissance construction, but an ancient one, located in Rome near the Church of San Giorgio in Velabro, between the forum Boarium and the Velabrum: the so-called Janus Quadrifrons, a four-way marble arch that probably dates to the period of Constantine and that, though originally intended as a place in which cattle traders could take shelter, was long thought to have been a temple of Janus. This impressive construction, located in an area that was particularly picturesque before modern times, features prominently in the sixteenth-century illustrations of Roman monuments by Marten van Heemskerck (fig. 9), Giovanni Antonio Dosio (fig. 10), and Etienne Du Pé rac (fig. 11). Given Raphael’s well-attested familiarity with the archaeological ruins of Rome, it is hard to imagine that he did not know this building well. In both its outward appearance and its basic structure—its openness, its massive sustaining structures, its barrel vaults, and its dimensions—the Janus Quadrifrons


77. On Raphael’s interest in ancient architecture, see Howard Burns, “Raffaello e ‘quell’antiqua architettura,’” and Arnold Nesselrath, “Raffaello e lo studio dell’antico nel Rinascimento,” in Raffaello architett, pp. 381–96 and 397–421. San Giorgio in Velabro happened to be the title-church of Raffaello Riario (1461–1521), the cardinal protector of the Augustinian order and a special patron of Giles of Viterbo. Riario was closely connected with this church and continued to be known as the cardinal of San Giorgio even after he was promoted to other, more important cardinal bishoprics.


FIG. 9.—Marten van Heemskerck, view of Janus Quadrifrons, ca. 1535. From van Heemskerck, Die römischen Skizzenbücher (1975).

is obviously far more similar to Raphael's design than Bramante's is. Moreover, the triumphal arch behind the main building in the fresco may correspond to a triumphal arch, the Arcus or Monumentum Argentariorum (also known as the Arch of Septimus Severus in the forum Boarium), incorporated into the bell tower of San Giorgio and located not more than about twelve meters away from the Janus Quadrifrons.

80. The width of the arches in the Janus Quadrifrons is 7 meters (6.25 measuring at the bases). To judge from the contemporary illustrations, in the sixteenth century the ground seems to have reached much higher up along the sides of the building than it does now, perhaps by as much as 3 meters in places.

81. On this arch, see Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae, ed. Eva Margareta Steinby (Rome, 1993), 1:105–6; Platner, A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome, p. 44; Jordan, Topographie der Stadt Rom im Alterthum, 1:2:470; and Antonio Muñoz, Il restauro della basilica di S. Giorgio al Velabro in Roma (Rome, 1926), figs. 2, 14, 15. The proximity of the arch to the Janus Quadrifrons is evident in all the sixteenth-century drawings and engravings. To be sure, it is situated to the side of the central axis of the Janus Quadrifrons and is aligned
But, on the other hand, there are also fundamental differences between the ancient Roman monument and Raphael’s philosophical convention center—above all, the Janus Quadrifrons lacks the central dome that is an indispensable feature of Bramante’s plans and that recurs prominently in Raphael.

How can this state of affairs be interpreted? Perhaps Raphael’s building was not intended to acquire any specific semantic value at all; it might simply be designed to furnish a grand backdrop for a noble spectacle and not have any further meaning. But if it was part of Raphael’s intention that the viewer recognize a particular building in it, it still remains unclear whether we are supposed to think of the plans for San Pietro, which were being elaborated at just this time by Bramante (and which, as far as Raphael knew then, would someday be realized in the final building), or of the well-known temple of Janus Quadrifrons, not far away on the other bank of the Tiber, or of some combination of the two. After all, the combination of the cupola and the Janus arch has struck more than one viewer as incongruous, and perhaps Raphael might have intended the viewer to be reminded by the former of San Pietro and by the latter of the Janus Quadrifrons. Certainly uninformed viewers would most likely receive an impression of anonymous grandeur. But we shall probably wish to conclude that that was Raphael’s sole intention only if we fail to find a satisfactory reason for preferring one of the other, semantically much richer, possibilities.

It is at this point that Giles of Viterbo reenters the discussion, for he was a conspicuous exponent of the Etruscan revival of the turn of the sixteenth century. This bizarre movement, which received considerable impetus from the historical forgeries of the notorious Annianus of Viterbo,

differently, so that it cannot be seen through the arches of the main building, but precisely such simplifying spatial realignments of buildings located close to one another is characteristic of Renaissance architectural capricci. Again, granted that this arch has the form of a simple architrave resting upon two square supporting pilasters and lacks the curved shape of the one in The School of Athens, the visual logic of Raphael’s painting, with its series of concentric circles formed by the arches of the building and the semicircular frame of the entire painting, all designed to draw the viewer’s eyes irresistibly to Plato and Aristotle, precluded any such rectangular construction.


capitalized upon the traditional mystique of the Etruscans and upon provincial patriotism to develop strange theories of cultural primacy and transmission, all designed to restore to the ancient Etruscans (and to their modern descendants) the importance they were alleged once to have had. Giles’s views on this subject are expressed above all in two works: the sermon “Fulfillment of the Christian Golden Age under Pope Julius II,” delivered in San Pietro in December 1507 in the presence of the pope and at his request; and a lengthy work of historical speculation, Historia viginti saeculorum, written between 1509 and 1516 and never published. These writings reveal that Giles had studied at first- and above all at second-hand (namely Annius’s) a large number of authentic and forged ancient sources and had derived from them a theory whose coherence is surpassed only by its absurdity.

Giles distinguished four golden ages in the history of the world: the first was inaugurated by Lucifer, the second by Adam, the third by the good king Janus among the Etruscans, and the fourth by Christ. It is the third that interests us here. According to Giles, the Etruscans were just as much objects of God’s providential care as were the Hebrews, and Janus brought the true Etruscan revelation to Italy when he first landed at Rome on the hill appropriately named the Janiculum; hence this bank of the Tiber was referred to as the Etruscan, as opposed to the Roman, one. Eventually this revelation was forgotten, but at a much later date the “Hetrusca Iani sedes,” the Etruscan hill of the Vatican, became the holy seat of the Christian religion. For Giles, Janus was a predecessor of St. Peter, not only in his function as a key bearer who opened the door to the Christian faith, but also in his location, for Janus had already consecrated the Vatican for Christianity long before Christ. But the Vatican is not the only place in Rome that the Etruscan revival identified with Janus. Annius of Viterbo for one explicitly links Janus with the temple of

84. The sermon was first published by O’Malley, in “Fulfillment of the Christian Golden Age under Pope Julius II: Text of a Discourse of Giles of Viterbo, 1507,” Traditio 25 (1969): 265–338. The text is taken from the sole surviving manuscript, CXVI/1–30, in the Biblioteca Pública e Arquivo Distrital de Évora, Portugal. The manuscript evidently presents a version that differs slightly from the orally delivered sermon. For a contemptuous description and analysis of Historia viginti saeculorum, with some citations, see Léon Gabriel Pélissier, De opere historico Aegidi Cardinalis Viterbiensis quod manuscriptum latet in bibliotheca quae est in urbe Augustinianorum Angelica eiusdemque operis cui titulus praest “Historia viginti saeculorum” vera indole breviter disserruit (Montpellier, 1896). For Janus and the Etruscans, see pp. 7, 8n, 15, 35.

85. See O’Malley, Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform, pp. 123–24. Thus Giles addresses Pope Julius II with the words, “extremum iam in terris aurum nosse operae pretium est, quod eadem in aede, te imperante, nunc fulget quantum, in qua tertium, Ianorege, iam fulsit” ("it is worth the trouble to get to know the last golden age on the earth, since the fourth one is now shining in the same building under your rule in which the third one once shone under Janus’s rule") (Giles, quoted in O’Malley, “Fulfillment of the Christian Golden Age under Pope Julius II," p. 295, ll. 375–77 [23v]).
Janus Quadrifrons. Moreover, Janus is important for Giles not only as a pre-Christian witness to Christian revelation but also as the inventor of philosophy. For the Etruscan wisdom Janus brought to Italy included theology, love of things human, and love of things divine, but above all, as its first and introductory discipline, philosophy—in which Giles includes the scientific investigation of natural phenomena. In a fragment he attributed to pseudo-Cato, Annius had already invented the evidence that seemed to prove that Janus had once taught physics, astronomy, theology, morality, and divination. But the identification of Janus as the founder of philosophy seems to be Giles’s own contribution.

For the uninformed viewer of The School of Athens, the building that accommodates Raphael’s philosophers conveys a suitable if unspecific impression of sober dignity. But we cannot exclude the possibility that for people who had heard Giles’s sermon not long before Raphael began to work on the fresco or were otherwise familiar with Giles’s well-known views or related ones, that building could have acquired a highly specific semantic charge. If they recognized in the structure of four unenclosed

86. Annius writes: “movi [scil. Janus] a Quirinali ad radices capitolii: ubi est Janus quatuor portarum” (“I [that is, Janus] moved from the Quirinal to the foot of the Capitol Hill, where Janus of the four gates is located”) (Johannes Annius, Antiquitatum variarum volumina XVII [1498; Paris, 1512], fol. xlviii).

87.

Prima namque Hetruriae disciplina pueros diuinae rerum cognitioni impares philosophiam docebat, coeli elementorumque naturas, metall, stirpes, animantes, sensibiliae alia demonstrans. ... Prima igitur philosophiam, secunda theologiam, tertia humanos amores, quarta coelestis diuinosque praecipiebat. (For the Etruscan doctrine was the first to teach philosophy to boys who were not up to the divine knowledge of things, indicating the natures of heaven and of the elements, metals, plants, animals, and other perceivable things. ... For first it taught philosophy, second theology, third human loves, and fourth celestial and divine loves.) [Giles, quoted in O’Malley, “Fulfillment of the Christian Golden Age under Pope Julius II,” p. 290, ll. 188–91 (16v) and ll. 201–2 (17r)]

88.

Hoc loci notanda sunt haec. Primum quod Janus docuit physicam et astronomiam: ut Berosus asserit & physici: quia teste Macrobio Physici Ianum miris argumentis divinitatis consecrant. Et ut ait idem Berosus & Macrobius in primo Saturnium referens Xenophonem: primus Italos docuit ritos sacros & religionem & Theologiam: adeo ut Mythici tradant sub Iano olim domos religione ac sanctimoniamuisse munitas. Et ut prosequitur Berosus moralem viam & divinationes, quibus praevaleuere Hetrusci, docuit, & litteris mandavit. (Here the following points should be noted. First, that Janus taught physics and astronomy, as Berosus asserts, and the natural philosophers too, because on the testimony of Macrobius the natural philosophers consecrate Janus with wonderful proofs of his divinity. And as the same Berosus says, as does Macrobius in the first book of his Saturnalia reporting the testimony of Xenophon: he was the first to teach the Italians sacred rites and religion and theology: so that the mythic authors report that formerly under the rule of Janus the houses were protected by religion and piety. And, as Berosus continues, he taught the way of morality and divination, in which the Etruscans were dominant, and put them into writing.) [Annius, Antiquitatum variarum volumina XVII, fol. lxxix (from ps.-Catonis fragmentum liber vii)]
arches with massive sustaining walls fundamental features of the temple of Janus Quadrifrons, they would not be surprised, for what more appropriate location could be imagined for an idealizing synopsis of all of ancient philosophy than the temple of the divine king who had first established that discipline? And if they also recognized in the central cupola a fundamental feature of San Pietro, they would have recalled that Janus had not only founded Greek philosophy but had also sanctified the precinct in which one day the Vatican basilica would be built. They would have recognized in the collocation of scientists and natural philosophers a typical feature of the “Etrusca disciplina,” and in Pluto’s gesture upwards the reminder that that discipline began with philosophy but then moved up through theology and the love of things human to arrive at the highest stage, a love of things divine. They might well have imagined that they understood as a whole not only this particular painting but also its location opposite the *Disputa* and within the system of the Stanza della Segnatura better than anyone who did not recognize these references possibly could have. And perhaps they might even have been right.

5. Reading Raphael

Most likely, given the state of our evidence, we will never know for sure whether Giles really did advise Raphael and whether Raphael in fact associated his philosopher’s hall with the Janus Quadrifrons and that building in turn with the Etruscan culture hero Janus. Even if external evidence were discovered that supported the suggestions made here, we would still almost certainly not be able to prove that it was Giles himself who had communicated his theories to Raphael and planned the program of this fresco. After all, Giles made no secret of his views; they were well known in the papal court and were shared by many of his contemporaries. Giles could have assigned someone else to deal with Raphael, or indeed someone else could have done so independently of Giles but nonetheless have shaped a program strikingly similar to Giles’s own ideas. But, on the other hand, in the end it does not really matter very much who actually spoke to Raphael. All that matters is what the ideas were that were spoken about.

For a variety of reasons, the hypotheses that I have advanced here

89. Plato’s gesture, for such a viewer, must have seemed an unmistakable allusion to Plato’s *Symposium*, a key text for Ficino.

90. On the relation of *The School of Athens* to the *Disputa*, see, for example, Danbolt, “Triumphus Concordiae.”

cannot be definitively proven: the incompleteness of our evidence, the methodological uncertainty of some of the steps in my argumentation, the impossibility of quantifying the degree of similarity among the various texts and images presented here. But my purpose was not to construct an irrefutable proof of an indisputable historical fact but rather to attempt to reconstruct a historically possible scheme of interpretation—that is, to excavate the horizon of expectations and associations that artists and viewers could have connected with *The School of Athens* in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Nothing proves that this fresco was in fact understood in just this way—and nothing proves that it was not. In the end, what matters is only whether our feeling of understanding this picture and the pleasure we take in it are deepened and enriched by considerations of the sort proposed here.

If the identification of Plato’s *Protagoras* as the pre-text for Raphael’s *The School of Athens* is accepted, at least one further question remains: why no one seems to have thought of it before. After all, this image and this text are both central documents in Western culture. Art historians have been searching for Raphael’s textual source for centuries; almost all have read the *Protagoras*. Why then did they not make this connection? Perhaps because they were looking for the answer to the wrong question. They were trying to find some book that Raphael’s fresco was intended to illustrate—some text, that is, whose relation to *The School of Athens* was so intrinsic to the painting’s meaning that if one did not recognize the former one would not have understood the latter.92 That is why they looked so hard for some text in which Plato, Aristotle, and all the other specific philosophers in the fresco figured prominently just as they do there. But there is no such text—or, rather, in all the centuries before Raphael only one such text ever existed: the lost written program for this very painting, which reconceived this scene from Plato’s *Protagoras* in terms of the panoply of ancient philosophy. Whether that program was written by Giles himself, or under his instructions, or with reference to him, or even only in a cultural ambiance that shared some of his views, we may never know and do not really care.

We have understood an illustration when we can read in it the text to which it refers. If *The School of Athens* were an illustration, it could never have come to dominate our culture over the last five centuries as it has, for it has done so without reference to any particular text. The scene we view in *The School of Athens* is highly dramatic, filled with intensely vital characters energetically communicating with one another. Yet so silent is their discourse, so void of specific content, that with very few exceptions—Plato’s and Aristotle’s books, Pythagoras’s tablet, the geometer’s problem—we cannot hear what they are saying and cannot ascertain any

determinate meaning in those gestures that seem so full of significance but are in fact so empty. The School of Athens suggests a transparent intelligibility but limits comprehension to the participants it depicts, resolutely withdrawing from our attempts to read it.

Seventy years before Raphael painted his fresco, Leon Battista Alberti had defined historia as the privileged object of painting. In many ways, Alberti’s prescriptions read like a prescription Raphael consciously set out to fulfill, in such detailed aspects as the geometry of the floors and walls (§34), the harmonious bodies and beautiful faces (§35), the balance and proportion of the parts of the bodies (§36), the appropriateness and vivacity of dramatic gesture (§37), the dignity (§38) and conformity of the bodies to the actions they are performing (§39), the pleasingly ordered variety of bodies and colors (§40), and above all the expression of strong inner emotion by lively but graceful outward gesture (§§41–44). But Alberti’s fundamental conception of historia as an easily recognizable dramatic moment extracted out of the sequence of a well-known secular or holy, mythical or historical narrative corresponds to nothing in Raphael’s painting, which floats in an artistic no-man’s-land between unambiguous allegories (which it has left behind) and unambiguous historical paintings (which it only partially anticipates) and brings together figures who could never have occupied the same space at the same time and lets them perform a unified dramatic action that they could never have even imagined. That is why all attempts to identify the historia behind Raphael’s painting—beginning with Vasari, who saw in it the storia “when the theologians harmonized philosophy and astrology with theology”—have gone so badly astray. If Raphael’s philosophers were merely timeless representatives of Dame Philosophy, it would never even occur to us to try to imagine the single dramatically unified action in which they would be the participants; if they were merely historically contingent individuals, they would have been brought together in such a way that we would be able to recognize them as such. Yet the fresco is neither the one nor the other, but rather—in a manner that, strictly speaking, is quite impossible—both at once.

The frustration engendered by this ingenious paradox has shaped

93. See in contrast the title of Vissing, “Le Débordement du sens.”


95. Vasari, Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architetti nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568, 4:166.
much of the scholarly and popular reception of *The School of Athens* and even today unsettles and thereby seduces every viewer. For Raphael's fresco seems eminently legible; it is filled with books and with figures who are all engaged in discursive activities, incessantly talking, listening, and above all all understanding. Yet we cannot read it. Precisely that is why it never ceases to fascinate us.