A Reader's Guide

to

N.G. Gautreau's

Francesca Allegri

A novel of a 17th Century Woman
(Years 1652—1655 in the Paratge Saga)

Trobador
Publishing

Trobador Publishing
Wakefield, MA 01880
www.normanggautreau.com
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A Note on Reader's Groups

If time and location permit (generally the Boston area and parts of New England) the author would be pleased to meet with readers' groups in person. Absent that, arrangements can be made for an audio or video conference with the author.

The author enjoys making himself available for these meetings because he strongly believes stories are a cooperative effort between author and reader—the author provides a context and some select scene details and the reader fleshes out the story in his or her mind, i. e., makes it personal. Therefore, it's always a delightful learning experience to discover what the end product turned out to be (which, of course, will be different for every author-reader tandem.)

Story Summary

Uprooted from her ancestral home of Aquilac in the South of France, Francesca Allegri comes to live with her uncle, the noted composer Gregorio Allegri, in Rome. She ignores a papal decree by boldly smuggling a manuscript of her great uncle's music out of Rome and, almost instantly, this highly educated, headstrong woman is plunged into the high-stakes intrigues of the Vatican. Her defiance of Donna Olimpia, the most powerful person of the time, makes her an enemy of the establishment elite who chase her and her lover all across Europe. If she is caught, a dungeon awaits and, perhaps, burning at the stake. Her response? She stokes their anger even further by authoring a book, more heretical even than Galileo, in which she challenges the Church's worldview and tries to understand evil and what she, a lone woman, can do about it.

But all of this is what happens in the action of the story. Beneath the surface o the story, however, Francesca struggles to make herself whole again after suffering several traumatic experiences which eat at the core of her being. Consequently, none of her standing up to the Vatican, none of her boldness and defiance, will mean much unless, in the end, she can save herself. It is something she must first realize, then squarely face.

Dramatis Personæ

(* indicates a real, historical character)

Characters Introduced in Part 1—1652, Cantus Firmus

Francesca Allegri (b. 1628)
Daughter of Jacopo Allegri and Dolça Breasiac, niece of Gregorio Allegri.

Paolo della Luna (b. 1620)
Painter and itinerant actor with his troupe I Bricconi who plays the character Flavio.

Gregorio Allegri* (b. 1582)
Composer and maestro di cappella of the Vatican Choir. His greatest work, Miserere mei, Deus, was composed in the 1630s.

Athanasius Kircher* (b. 1601 or 1602)
Francesca’s tutor. Jesuit scholar with about 40 books to his credit on topics including music, geology, medicine and oriental studies, among others.

Donna Olimpia Maidalchini Pamphili, a.k.a. “Once-Pious”* (b. 1591)
Sister-in-law to, and reputed mistress of, Pope Innocent X. Many consider her the most powerful person in Rome at the time.

Matteo Boscoli (b. 1619)
Armorer. Husband of Francesca when the story begins.

Porzia (b. 1629)
Serving girl of Gregorio Allegri.

Signora Leopardi (b. 1611)
Neighbor of Paolo della Luna who serves food and drink to Paolo and his models. A habitual gossip.

Baldassare Neri (b. 1599)
Physician in Rome.

Suor Caterina (b. 1595)
Reverend Mother Prioress of the Dominican convent in Viterbo.

Suor Agnes (b. 1599)
A Dominican nun.

Suor Teresa (b 1615)
A Dominican nun.

Marietta Carloni (b. 1637)
A prisoner of Donna Olimpia at the convent in Viterbo.

Cassiel (b. ?)
An archangel. Known as the angel of solitude and tears.

Members of the Commedia del'arte Troupe, I Bricconni

Orazio Briosco (b. 1601)
Plays Pantalone, a caricature of a Venetian merchant.

Ugolino Briosco (b. 1628)
Orazio's son. Plays Pedrolino, a roguish character who delights is practical jokes.

Bianca Macello (b. 1612)
Plays Columbina, a witty woman who is bright and always plotting.

Cristoforo Macello (b. 1610)
Bianca's husband. Plays Il Dottore, a doctor and a caricature of a learned man, pompous.

Giotto Lusitano (b. 1627)
Plays Arlecchino, an acrobat and a wit, childlike and amorous.

Fabrizio Ficino (b. 1605)
No longer plays a character after losing his voice. Instead, he is prop master and mask maker.

Elisabetta Ficino (b. 1629)
Fabrizio's daughter. Plays the servant girl, Angelica.

Vittoria Senibaldi (b. 1622)
Plays the inamorata, Vittoria, daughter to Pantalone.

Nicolo Marino (b. 1620)
Plays Il Capitano, a professional soldier who boasts of his exploits but in fact is cowardly.

Folco Frangipane (b. 1618)
Plays Zanni, a character who is at the bottom of the pecking order, the eternal unfortunate.

Characters Introduced in Part 2—1654, Abellimente

Carlo Folengo (b. 1621)
A private soldier in Donna Olimpia's employ.

Lucca Lippi (b. 1622)
A private soldier in Donna Olimpia's employ.

Maffeo Festa (b. 1592)
A corrupt priest in Milan.

Raimon Breasiac (b. 1598)
Francesca's uncle. Lord of Castèl Aquilac.
Aliénor Breasiac (b. 1600)
Francesca's aunt. Raimon's wife.

Étienne Breasiac a.k.a. "Papet" (b. 1570)
Francesca's grandfather.

Antonia Breasiac a.k.a. "Mameta" (b. 1575)
Francesca's grandmother.

Tristan Breasiac (b. 1628)
Francesca's cousin.

Guillem Breasiac (b. 1629)
Francesca's cousin.

Agnes Breasiac (b. 1631)
Francesca's cousin.

Uc Pauc (b. 1612)
An old friend of Francesca's who believes he has lived many lives before.

Odoardo Bembo (b. 1611)
An Italian merchant.

Tullia Bembo (b. 1615)
Odoardo's wife.

Susanna Bembo (b. 1634)
Odoardo's and Tullia's daughter.

Matteo's Companion # 1 a.k.a. Alberto (b. 1621)
A private soldier in the employ of Donna Olimpia.

Matteo's Companion # 2 (b. 1622)
A private soldier in the employ of Donna Olimpia.

Matteo's Companion # 3 (b. 1622)
A private soldier in the employ of Donna Olimpia.

Jules Cardinal Mazarin* (b. 1602)
A diplomat and politician who serves as the chief minister of France. The principle advisor to Louis XIV.

Louis XIV, King of France* (b. 1638)
A Bourbon monarch also known as Louis the Great or the Sun King. He ends up being the longest reigning king in European history (more than 72 years).

Auguste Arnauld (b. 1607)
A printer in Paris.

Ibrahim Cabellera (b. 1602)
A printer in Amsterdam.

Heinrich Schütz* (b. 1585)
One of the most celebrated German composers of the 17th century, known chiefly for his vocal and choral music.

Euphrosina Schütz* (b. 1623)
Daughter of Heinrich Schütz. She dies young.

Klaus Meitner (b. 1601)
The proprietor of Zum Roten Bären, an inn/restaurant in Freiburg.

Gunther Huysmann (b. 1600)
The Bürgermeister of Breisach am Rhein near Freiburg.

Hans Huysmann (b. 1640)
Gunther's grandson.

Otto Huysmann (b. 1623)
Gunther's son.

Zucker (b. 1649)
The Huysmanns' dog, a Rottweiler Metzgerhund.

Characters Introduced in Part 3—1655, Tenebrae

Signora Torecelli (b. 1590)
An Italian midwife.

Baldassare Tasso (b. 1599)
The Grand Inquisitor on Malta.

Father Pork, a.k.a. Father Verro (b. 1598)
An inquisitor.

Father Old Goat (b. 1582)
An inquisitor.

Bajada (b. 1608)
A friendly prison guard.

Mikiel (b. 1614)
A mean prison guard.

Pipitsa (b. 1598)
A Maltese midwife.

Jacopo Allegri (b. 1603)
Francesca's father.

Dolça Allegri (b. 1608)
Francesca's mother.

Cesare Amati (b. 1604)
An Italian wine merchant who travels with the Allegri family.

Faustina Amati (b. 1609)
Cesare's wife.

Emilio Amati (b. 1629)
Cesare's son.

Isabella Amati (b. 1630)
Cesare's daughter.

Frau Köpfel (b. 1594)
A starving old crone in Freiburg.

A Young Priest (b. 1625)
A newly minted priest in Freiburg.

A Deacon (b. 1620)
Companion to the young priest.

Herr Engelmann (b. 1612)
A prosperous businessman in Freiburg.

Lazzaro Fogliani (b. 1620)
Francesca's brother-in-law. A maker of cheese.

Concetta Fogliani (b. 1625)
Francesca's older sister. Lazarro's wife.

Pietra Fogliani (b. 1650)
Francesca's niece. Daughter of Lazarro and Concetta.

Dolça della Luna (b. 1655)
Francesca and Paolo's daughter.

Characters Introduced in the 1st Coda—1770, Falsobordone

Leopold Mozart* (b. 1719)
A German composer, conductor, teacher, and violinist who is the father of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (b. 1756)
A musical prodigy who goes on to become one of the most cherished composers in history.

Father Oberhoffer (b. 1715)
A successor to Father Kircher at the Collegium Romanum.

Prince Archbishop Hieronymus von Colloredo* (b. 1732)
The ruler of Salzburg and the patron of Mozart.

Characters Introduced in the 2nd Coda—1944, Stile Antico

Adolph Fried (b. 1900)
A professor of music at Freiburg University.

Hilda Lenz (b. 1902)
A teacher of music at Freiburg University.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. How is the main theme of Francesca Allegri expressed in Paolo's mention of Montaigne's kidney stones and Francesca's reply? ("By speaking of my agonies, as you call them, I'm just as likely to relive them as relieve them. Have you thought of that?")

2. How is a principal sub-theme expressed by Paolo's advice to Francesca that she can either raise an army or adopt a cat?

3. How is another sub-theme expressed when Francesca presses Father Kircher regarding the Inferno? ("In Dante Alighieri's Inferno, in the very first Canto, the shade of Virgil leads Dante past the leopard, the lion and the she-wolf, but can go no further. Why?")

4. How does Francesca's specific recommendation to Paolo of the "Hymn to Mars" as a subject for his painting reflect her deepest concerns?

5. If Francesca's story took place in the 21st century what diagnosis would she likely receive?

6. Discuss the importance of story to Francesca. How does she use it to deal with the things she has to deal with? Can you generalize from her response to a universal human response? How does story work for her? How does it fail her?

7. Francesca challenges Father Kircher by asking why, in the Inferno, the shade of Virgil can lead Dante past the leopard, the lion and the she-wolf but can go no further. What is the deeper message she is conveying to him with this question?

8. What is the meaning of Montaigne's cat? How does Francesca's adoption of the Maltese cat resolve her story?

9. Early on in the story Francesca incinerates a spider then burns its web where five dead flies are entangled. In the process, she (intentionally?) burns the palm of her hand. What is the symbolism of this scene? Why five dead flies? Why the burned palm?

10. What are the author's purposes in including the first coda (1770) and the second coda (1944) in the book?

11. What is Francesca really saying when she asks Father Kircher why there are animalcules? How does this affect their relationship?

12. How is this same question expressed in a different way?

13. Why is Francesca so committed to an education?

14. How are Francesca's ideas about the universe constrained by the society in which she lives? by her personal experiences? by her hopes?

15. What is Paolo's role in the story? How does he fulfill that role?

16. Paolo advises Francesca that if she wants to fight the evil she sees she has two choices: she can raise an army or she can adopt a cat. What does he mean by this? What else does he say?

17. At one point Paolo says to Francesca, "Chicca, for the love of God I'm not testing your knowledge of syllogisms!" Why does he say that and what does it have to say about his insight into her problem? Are there other examples like this of his gentle criticism?

18. What is the role of Athanasius Kircher in relation to Francesca? What is her role in relation to him?

19. What does Francesca learn from Marietta?

20. How do Francesca's experiences relate to what we know about human memory? What is suggested by the flintlock pistol?

21. What is Francesca's purpose in trying to learn how to pronounce some words in Maltese?

22. What is the role of Epicurus in the story? Why did Francesca name her horse Epicurus? How does that compare to the name Marietta gives to her horse?

Recommendations for Further Reading

These books are among the many that influenced the writing of
Francesca Allegri.
(Descriptions taken from Amazon.com)

Annie Dillard
For the Time Being
Why do we exist? Where did we come from? Can one person matter? In this book Annie Dillard searches for answers in a powerful array of images that include pictures of bird-headed dwarfs; ten thousand clay figures fashioned for a Chinese emperor in place of the human court that might have followed him into death; the paleontologist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin crossing the Gobi Desert; the dizzying variety of clouds. Vivid, eloquent, haunting, For the Time Being evokes no less than the terrifying grandeur of all that remains tantalizingly and troublingly beyond our understanding.

Joseph Campbell
The Power of Myth
Among his many gifts, Joseph Campbell's most impressive was the unique ability to take a contemporary situation, such as the murder and funeral of President John F. Kennedy, and help us understand its impact in the context of ancient mythology. Herein lies the power of The Power of Myth, showing how humans are apt to create and live out the themes of mythology. Based on a six-part PBS television series hosted by Bill Moyers, this classic is especially compelling because of its engaging question-and-answer format, creating an easy, conversational approach to complicated and esoteric topics. For example, when discussing the mythology of heroes, Campbell and Moyers smoothly segue from the Sumerian sky goddess Inanna to Star Wars' mercenary-turned-hero, Han Solo. Most impressive is Campbell's encyclopedic knowledge of myths, demonstrated in his ability to recall the details and archetypes of almost any story, from any point in history, and translate it into a lesson for spiritual living in the here and now.

Harold S. Kushner

The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happen to a Good Person

The story of Job is one of unjust things happening to a good man. Yet after losing everything, Job—though confused, angry, and questioning God—refuses to reject his faith, although he challenges some central aspects of it. Rabbi Harold S. Kushner examines the questions raised by Job's experience, questions that have challenged wisdom seekers and worshippers for centuries. What kind of God permits such bad things to happen to good people? Why does God test loyal followers? Can a truly good God be all-powerful? Rooted in the text, the critical tradition that surrounds it, and the author's own profoundly moral thinking, Kushner's study gives us the book of Job as a touchstone for our time. Taking lessons from historical and personal tragedy, Kushner teaches us about what can and cannot be controlled, about the power of faith when all seems dark, and about our ability to find God.

Harold Kushner

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

When Harold Kushner's three-year-old son was diagnosed with a serious degenerative disease suggesting he would only live until his early teens, the rabbi was faced with one of life's most difficult questions: Why, God? Years later, Rabbi Kushner wrote this straightforward, elegant contemplation of the doubts and fears that arise when tragedy strikes. Kushner shares his wisdom as a rabbi, a parent, a reader, and a human being. Often imitated but never superseded, When Bad Things Happen to Good People is a classic that offers clear thinking and consolation in times of sorrow.

A Survey of thought on the Problem of Evil

Introduction

In preparing to write Francesca Allegri I did a lot of reading on the problem of evil. I knew it was going to be one of the themes of the novel and a I quickly realized that it presented me with four specific challenges:

1. How to make my research thorough enough to understand the main dimensions of the problem without over-committing to what, after all, could be a lifelong endeavor;
2. How to reframe what I learned so that it was authentic in the setting, i.e. consistent with the mind and milieu of a 17th century woman;
3. How to avoid the greatest crime of historical novelists which is to dump all research into the novel-i.e. all that stuff that fascinates the author but would slow down the story. And a related fourth challenge;
4. How to incorporate the essential research into a fast moving, well-written and compelling work of fiction that engages the readers' minds as well as senses.

This essay is the result of my having, I think, succeeded in points 1 and 2. Here, I intend to share a summary of my research for readers who would like to pursue the problem of evil further. (I'll leave it to my readers to decide if I've met the challenges of points 3 and 4.)

At some point in the long, long crawl up from early primate cluelessness to human consciousness it slowly dawned on us that bad things happen … and we asked why. In the words of Thomas Hobbes (written, coincidently, one year before the begining of Francesca Allegri), life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." To which some wag has added, "then you die." And that's it, you see: we die. We die and we want to know why. It is that central question of human existence that distinguishes us from all other sentient beings on this planet. We know there is an abundance of suffering in the world and we want an explanation. We know we're going to die and we demand to know why. And in order to find answers to these vexing questions humans have always made up stories that embody the explanations. We call these stories myths. When they become elaborate and sophisticated, when people commit to them with fervor, we call them religions.

Although this problem of evil is one of the themes of Francesca Allegri, a novel is not a proper place for a scholarly discussion of such an issue. Instead, novels are supposed to be good stories with all the characteristics of well-developed characters, tight plotting, convincing (and entertaining) dialogue, and narrative description that brings place, time and person electrically alive for the reader. Accordingly, I mostly left such material out of the novel (though it exists not explicity but as deep layer that informs the motives of the chracters, especially Francesca.) Instead, I offer the following survey on the problem of evil for readers who want to pursue the subject further.

Humans have been dealing with this problem for millennia. No doubt in prehistory there have been countless intriguing answers that have been lost to us—many stories, many sophisticated myths. (Indeed, one appears in Pon-ka-sa, year 12,000 BCE in the Paratge Saga, which is scheduled for release in the fall of 2013.)

Earlier, I stated that we humans invent stories, or myths, to account for the existence of evil and suffering in the world. Without taking a position, pro or con, concerning the divine source of these stories, I will state that some of the most sophisticated and complex stories are known as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Taoism, among others. In other words, I believe that all religions are stories—myths, if you will—whose main purpose is to explain what life is all about (including suffering and evil) and how people should behave in the face of the overwhelming mystery of life. Therefore, let's see what some of the major religions have said about evil. After that, we'll turn to secular stories and examine what philosophers have said.

Judeo-Christian Beliefs

The apocalyptic parts of the Bible see suffering as due to cosmic evil forces, that God, for mysterious reasons, has given power over the world, but which will soon be defeated and things will be set right.

Evil is a test from a God whose purpose is beyond human undertanding.

In recorded time any discussion of the problem of evil must begin, of course, with the Book of Job; it is one of the most revered stories in the Western canon, one that attempts to question why suffering exists.

Originally written in Hebrew as an epic poem, the story shows how Job, a just and righteous person, who loves God, always strives to do in life what he believes his god wants. He commits no grievous errors, does nothing wrong. As a result he is very successful and prosperous. However, a character in the story—let's call him Satan—claims that Job is only righteous because God has rewarded him with a good life. He suggests that if God were to allow everything Job loved to be destroyed, Job would then cease to be righteous. Accepting the challenge, God allows Satan to destroy Job's wealth and children, and to strike him with sickness and boils. Job discusses his condition with three friends who insist that God never allows bad things to happen to good people, and they therefore postulate that Job must have done something to deserve his punishment. Job claims that is not the case and states his willingness to defend himself to God. A fourth friend, Elihu, appears and avows that God is perfectly just and good. God then responds to Job in a speech delivered from "out of a whirlwind," explaining that the workings of the world are beyond human understanding. In the end God states that the three friends are incorrect, and that Job is mistaken in assuming he could question God. God more than restores Job's prior health, wealth, and gives him new children (something Francesca sees as a serious problem with the story). The Book of Job offers two answers to the problem of evil: suffering is a test, and you will be rewarded later for passing it, and, God is not held accountable to human notions of justice.

Evil comes from a powerful and evil being.

Gnostic heresies within Christianity such as Manichaeism, Bogomilism and Catharism (a major theme in Songs of the Dove, Years 1190-1319 in the Paratge Saga, scheduled for release in the Summer of 2013) held that the material world was created through an intermediary being, a demiurge, rather than directly by God and it is this being, often viewed as Satan, who is responsible for the evil and suffering in the world. Indeed, the Cathars, who flourished in the South of France in the 12th and 13th centuries, advanced the dualist view that there existed two equally powerful gods, one evil, one good. The evil god was responsible for the material world and everything in it, including suffering and evil, and that he had contrived to imprison souls in imperfect human bodies, thus enslaving people to evil. The good god, on the other hand, was the god of all immaterial things such as light and spirit and immortal souls and it was to this good god's presence that the righteous Cathar journeyed after release from earthly imprisonment.

Evil is necessary for spiritual growth.

Ireneus, bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul (now Lyons, France), during the 2nd century CE, said that one cannot achieve moral goodness or love for God unless there is evil and suffering in the world. Evil enhances the human spirit and leads one to be truly moral and close to God. God made himself not immediately knowable so that people would struggle to know him and, through their efforts, become truly good. Thus, evil is a means to good because: "Hunger leads to pain, and causes a desire to feed. Knowledge of pain prompts humans to help others in pain."

He argued that evil offers the opportunity to grow morally. We would never become good if we didn't have to work at it, and, the curious Deist-like view that the world runs to a series of natural laws which are independent of any inhabitants of the universe and evil only occurs when these natural laws conflict with our own perceived needs. He argues that this is

not immoral in any way. (Apparently he would vehemently disagree with the 18th century German philosopher Leibnitz that this is the best of all possible worlds.)
It's clear that a dominant Christian view is that evil is the consequence of original sin about which there have been two opposing views.

Evil is the necessary consequence of original sin.

Pelagius, a 4th century ascetic and theologian, believed that original sin did not taint all of humanity and that human free will is capable of choosing good or evil without divine aid. Saint Augustine, on the other hand, blames all of us-you, me, and especially women. He argues that God created a perfect world and evil is merely a consequence of the fall of man, i.e. listening to that serpent and eating that damned apple. In short, we screwed it up through disobedience to God. Thus, moral evil is caused by man having become estranged from God and choosing, through free will, to deviate from his chosen path. Natural evil, on the other hand—earthquakes, storms, etc.—is caused by fallen angels, chief among whom is the devil. Augustine argues that God could not have created evil in the world and that evil is simply the absence of goodness; it cannot be a separate and unique substance. For example, blindness is not a separate thing in itself; it is merely the lack of sight. He took the position that Adam and Eve had the power to destroy God's perfect order (Eden), thus changing everything by bringing sin into the world, and that rebellious act then forever constrained our power to evade the consequences of original sin without divine aid. A variation of this view in Eastern Orthodoxy is that people inherit the nature of sinfulness but not Adam and Eve's guilt for their sin which resulted in the Fall. In other words, we are all flawed by our natures.

This, by the way, might explain the religious fundamentalist's hatred of Darwinism, for it makes the Augustinian view illogical in the following way: Darwin's thinking (and that of Gregor Mendel) contributed to the rise of genetics which today is being used to, among other things, tailor cancer treatment protocols according to the unique genetic makeup of each individual thus saving many lives, even those of fundamentalists who hate Darwin. However, if you believe in the notion of the inheritance of characteristics and you believe in intelligent design, then you have to say that evil is in our genes which, having been designed by God, means that God created evil, a direct contradiction of Augustine.

Evil is necessary, as a contrast, for good to exist.

But genetics was in the far distant future when Saint Thomas Aquinas elaborated on the Augustinian conception of evil by saying that it is a privation, or the absence of some good which belongs properly to the nature of the creature. That is, evil does not exist as objective fact, but as a subjective notion; things are evil not in themselves, but by reason of their relation to other things or persons. All realities are in themselves good; they produce bad results only incidentally; and consequently the ultimate cause of evil is fundamentally good including the objects in which evil is found. Another way of saying this is that the ovens at Auschwitz were fundamentally good—they were only ovens—and the evil they implied comprised only the incidental, subjective impressions of victims.

Evil is punishment.

The Catholic Encyclopedia states that there are three catagories of evil: metaphysical, moral, and physical, all of which are retribution for moral guilt, and that all three are necessary because the universe would be less perfect if it contained no evil. For, if there was no evil, there would be no sphere for patience and justice. Here, there is no doubt that God created evil for He, himself says, "I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace and I create evil. I the Lord do all these things." (Isaiah, 45.7). But the Catholic Encyclopedia goes on to assert that the evil of sin, though permitted by God, is in no sense due to him. Its cause is the abuse of free will by angels and men.

It must be noted that the universal perfection for which evil in some form is necessary refers to the perfection of this universe, not of any universe. Metaphysical evil—and, indirectly, moral evil—is included in the design of the universe, which is only partially known to us. Thus we cannot say, without denying Divine omnipotence, that another equally perfect universe could not be created in which evil would have no place. Does this sound familiar? It's similar to Francesca's thinking except that she does not see the present universe as perfect (precisely because of the evil in it) but she allows for the possibility of other universes that, increasingly, approach perfection.

Luther and Calvin, like the Catholics, explained evil as a consequence of original sin or the fall of man. However, because of their belief in predestination and omnipotence, this fall is seen as part of God's plan which, ultimately, humans may not be able to understand or explain.

Evil is in our natures and can be overcome.

Quakers have a concept of the "Inner Light" which is twofold. One, this light is capable of discerning between good and evil; it reveals the presence of both in human beings, and through its guidance, offers the alternative of choice. Second, the Inner Light opens the unity of all human beings to our consciousness. Friends believe that the potential for good, as well as evil, is inherent in everyone. Friends believe that the power of God to overcome evil is available in the nature of anyone who truly wants to do the will of God. To a great extent, we are the arbiter of our own destiny, having the power of choice. Salvation, in the Quaker sense, lies in our power to become children of God. This, of course, is another formulation of the notion of free will.

Evil is all in our minds.

Christian Scientists view evil as having no reality at all but as being due to false beliefs—evils such as sickness and death may be banished by correct understanding. Of course that raises the thorny question: Why is there, then, so much illness and death? However, Christian Scientists believe that the many instances of spiritual healing as recounted in their periodicals and in the textbook Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures by Mary Baker Eddy are evidence of the correctness of the teaching of the unreality of evil.

Evil is the result of the fall of angels.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Satan is the original cause of evil. The story they tell is that a rebellious Satan, though once a perfect angel, had feelings of self-importance and craved worship, and eventually challenged God's right to rule. He caused Adam and Eve to disobey God, and as a result humanity became pawns in the ongoing war between Jehovah and Satan for universal sovereignty. The angels who sided with Satan became demons. Jehovah's Witnesses explain God's subsequent tolerance of evil through the time-honored notion of free will. But they also hold that this period of suffering is one of non-interference from God, which provides individual humans the opportunity to show their willingness to submit to God's sovereignty and at some future time, known only to him, God will consider his right to universal sovereignty to have been settled for all time and nonconforming humans and demons will have been destroyed. Thereafter, evil will be summarily executed.

Islam

Evil is the result of sin and it's a test.

In Islam, there are two views of suffering and evil, both of which resemble views held by its sister faiths of Judaism and Christianity. Suffering is either the painful result of sin, or it is a test. In the latter view, suffering tests belief; a true Muslim will remain faithful through the trials of life. But suffering also reveals the hidden self to God. Suffering is built into the fabric of existence so that God may see who is truly righteous. In other words, God not only allows the various agonies and struggles of life, but has a purpose for them. Suffering opens up the soul and reveals it to God. God uses suffering to look within humans and test their characters, and correct the unbelievers.

Suffering is also a painful result of sin. In Islam, sin is associated with unbelief. Muslims surrender to God's will, and find peace in that surrender. Sometimes people forget to listen to the prophets, and fail to serve God in all that they do. They begin to misuse their divine gifts of intelligence, will, and speech and, thus enslaved by lust and by cravings for wealth and pleasure, they do evil and destructive things. These moments of unbelief can happen to anyone, and when people realize their mistake, they suffer. But when they make amends with true remorse, God forgives the sin. Genuine repentance is all that is needed to restore humans to a sinless state. However, individuals are always vulnerable to it, and sin and suffering are serious matters. The great struggle, or jihad, of human life is the struggle to perfect one's heart and live in total submission to God. And it is, by the way, possible to be a perfect Muslim, because God does not ask anyone to do anything that is beyond his or her ability.

Recognizing that they are the cause of their own suffering, individuals work to bring suffering to an end. In the Islamic view, righteous individuals are revealed not only through patient acceptance of their own suffering, but through their good works for others. And if suffering is a consequence of unbelief, then good works will relieve pain. Of course, as with any belief system, there are always some who declare themselves Muslim but who seem to violate its basic principles.

Hinduism

Evil is the result of bad karma from previous lives.

In Hinduism, the problem of evil is viewed as a problem of injustice. The central problem is stated thusly: God is omnipotent, omniscient, and just. Yet injustice permeates the world. How is this possible? It's a question of karma, or the actions and deeds performed by the individual in a lifetime. Of course, that could be a previous lifetime and therefore, pleasure and pain can be ascribed to the karma of a past life—not, it should be said, to God since God takes karma into consideration when meting out justice. In the end, however, and on the higher level of existence to which some devotees aspire, there is no evil or good because these are dependent on temporal circumstances and are beyond dualistic notions.

Buddhism

Evil is the result of excessive desire.

Buddhists concede that suffering and evil is what life is made of. The religion doesn't begin with an all powerful and good God, and the ensuing moral and logical problems that imply the existence of evil. In fact, in Buddhism, the question of God's existence is not even raised. Rather, it begins from a different starting point: that of suffering, not God's existence.

So how is evil, both moral and natural, understood by Buddhism? It's seen as a question of desire and the goal is ultimately to extinguish desire through discipline and suppression of the ego. This will lead to an awakening, a state of Nirvana, and eventually the transformation of the evils of the time. In Buddhism there are four noble truths embodied in Buddha's insights about life's most vexing problem: suffering. The first truth is a simple observation on the nature of life, namely that life is, after all, suffering, or "dukkha." The second noble truth identifies the cause of suffering as egotistical desire or "tanha." The third noble truth states that the cure for evil is the suppression of desire and the forth prescribes an eightfold path to climbing out of one's awakening or salvation from desire to Nirvana. There is no space here to discuss what the eightfold path entails beyond a simple list of the steps which will give some idea of where the focus lies. They are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

Secular Views on the Problem of Evil

EPICURUS

One of the first of the ancient philosophers to discuss the problem of evil was the Greek Epicurus. As quoted in the novel, his principle argument which so profoundly affected Francesca was:

> Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
> Then he is not omnipotent.
> Is he able, but not willing?
> Then he is malevolent.
> Is he both able and willing?
> Then whence cometh evil?
> Is he neither able nor willing?
> Then why call him God?

(It's interesting that this was reaffirmed, with almost the identical language, by the Scottish philosopher David Hume as late as the 18th century.)

Said in the form of a syllogism (Francesca's over-analytical mind would call this a conditional syllogism):

> If an all-powerful and perfectly good god exists, then evil does not.
> There is evil in the world.
> Therefore, an all-powerful and perfectly good god does not exist.

This is the logical problem of evil. It attempts to demonstrate that such assumed propositions lead to logical contradictions and therefore cannot be true. Most philosophical debate has focused on the propositions stating that God cannot exist with, or would want to prevent, all evils.

Evil is necessary for the greater good of free will to exist.

However, people who believe in an active, involved God might argue that He could very well exist with, and allow evil, in order to achieve a greater good. Some philosophers, like some theologians we met earlier, have proposed free will as that greater good. This argument accounts for moral evil by saying it is the result of free human action. However, this defense requires a supernatural evil spirit (Satan?) to explain such natural evils as earthquakes, tidal waves, virulent diseases, grotesque birth defects, etc

Critics of the free will response have questioned whether it accounts for the degree of evil seen in this world. One point in this regard is that while the value of free will may be thought sufficient to counterbalance minor evils, it is less obvious that it outweighs the harm of evils such as rape and murder. How is it possible, in the case of horrendous evils such as genocide (think the Holocaust) to say that such evils are balanced by free will?

Another point is that those actions of free beings which bring about evil very often diminish the freedom of those who suffer the evil. For example, the murder of a child may prevent the child from ever exercising his or her free will in a meaningful way. Given that such a case pits the freedom of an innocent child against the freedom of the evil-doer, it is not clear why God would not intervene for the sake of the child.

A second criticism is that the potential for evil inherent in free will may be limited by means which do not impinge on that free will. God could accomplish this by making moral actions especially pleasurable, so that they would be irresistible to us; he could also punish immoral actions immediately, and make it obvious that moral rectitude is in our self-interest; or he could allow bad moral decisions to be made, but intervene to prevent the harmful consequences from actually happening. A reply to this idea is that such a world in which God is a puppeteer would mean that free will has less or no real value.

But if an evil is necessary because it secures a greater good, then it appears we humans are relieved of the reponsibility to prevent it, for in doing so we would also prevent the greater good for which the evil is required. I suppose that means if we witness an old lady being raped and murdered in a dark alley, we're obligated not to intervene or call the police because such action would interfere with the "greater good."

Even worse, it seems that any action can be rationalized because if one can actually perform it, then it must be permitted by God for the sake of the greater good. From this line of thought one may conclude that, as these conclusions violate our basic moral intuitions, no greater good theodicy is true, and God does not exist. Alternatively, one may point out that greater good theodicies lead us to see every conceivable state of affairs as compatible with the existence of God, and in that case the notion of God's goodness is rendered meaningless.

All that said, the most persuasive argument against the free will defense of the existence of evil is that it only succeeds (to a greater or lesser extent) with reference to moral evil. It fails miserably to address natural evils such as earthquakes, hurricanes and devastating, pandemic diseases. Of course there have been some, like Pat Robertson, who don't draw a distinction between moral and natural evil and instead transform natural disasters into moral evils by blaming the victims, saying that such events represent God's punishment for moral evils like homosexuality, abortion and a host of other evils that have certainly offended Pat Robertson and, if he's to be believed, perhaps also God.

The extent to which advocates of the free will go to defend their positions is exemplified by Alvin Plantiga, professor of philosophy emeritus at the University of Notre Dame, who suggested that natural evils are caused by the free choices of supernatural beings such as demons (italics mine).

Evil is necessary for character development.

A much more sophisticated argument is the claim that evil and suffering are necessary for the growth of the indivudual. The religious view of this was developed in the early days of Christianity by Irenaeus of Lyons in the 2nd century and lately espoused by John Hick, a British philosopher of religion who died in 2012.

However, many evils do not seem to promote such growth, and can be positively destructive of the human spirit. One would be hard pressed to argue that, except in relatively rare cases, much spiritual growth occurred in the Nazi concentration camps. It can be argued much more convincingly that places like Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald were hellholes of broken, not elevated, spirits.

Another objection to the spiritual enrichment argument is the very distribution of suffering. If it were true that God permitted evil in order to promote spiritual growth, then wouldn't it be reasonable to expect evil to disproportionately befall those in poor spiritual health? But by no means does this seem to be the case. We know anecdotally that the decadent can enjoy lives of luxury that insulate them from evil, whereas many of the most pious are poor, and inundated with worldly evils.

A more subtle argument against this view is that the qualities developed through experience with evil seem to be useful precisely because they are useful in overcoming evil. But if there were no evil, then there would seem to be no value in such qualities, and consequently no need for God to permit evil in the first place.

Suffering is rewarded in heaven.

The notion of an afterlife has also been advanced for explaining the presence of evil in the terrestrial world by saying that the joys of heaven will compensate for the sufferings on earth. This is the argument advanced by Father Verro in the following excerpt from the novel:

> Father Verro leaned forward. "In your book you complain ad nauseum about the pain and suffering in the world but has it not occurred to you God ordained such pain and suffering precisely because it will be repaired

> in Heaven and Heaven will seem more wondrous for it? In ‘Revelations’ it is said, ‘And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain ….’ In short, Heaven is the reward for suffering on earth.”
>
> “Is it then your contention, Father, that the greater the suffering, the greater the reward?”
>
> “Of course. For all eternity.”
>
> “Which is why the martyrs accepted their suffering so willingly?” Francesca saw Father Kircher’s lips start to twitch into a smile he barely suppressed.
>
> “Yes,” said Father Verro. “Because they knew they would be rewarded with a higher place in Heaven.”
>
> “Because what is suffering in this life, brief as it is, when measured against the eternal joys of Heaven?”
>
> “At last, you seem to understand.”
>
> “So, given what you say,” Francesca said, “you must then agree that the kindest person in the world would be he who causes the greatest amount of misery to the greatest number of people, for in that way hordes of people would enjoy a higher place in Heaven.”

A version of this belief is the idea of karma which holds that good acts result in pleasure and bad acts with suffering. Thus, although there is suffering in the world, there is no undeserved suffering, and therefore how can it be called evil? The obvious objection that people sometimes suffer misfortune that is undeserved is countered by the notion of reincarnation, so that such suffering is the result of actions in previous lifetimes. Of course, like the Christian heaven, this offers an out, a sometime in the future when all will be made right, only this time it’s called nirvana, the state of being freed from suffering. Question: When Pat Robertson blamed the suffering of the Haitians on a pact they signed with the devil many lifetimes ago, was he channeling Buddha?

Evil is beyond human understanding.

Skeptical theists (there’s a label for all positions in this ageless debate) argue that due to humanity’s limited knowledge, we cannot expect to understand God or his ultimate plan. When a parent takes a small object from an infant to prevent possible choking, it’s because the parent cares for and loves that child. The infant however will be unable to appreciate this. It is argued that just as an infant cannot possibly understand the motives of its parent due to its cognitive limitations, so too are humans unable to comprehend God's will in their current physical and earthly state. Of course, another way of saying this is, "God works in mysterious ways."

A counterpoint to this argument is that while these ideas harmonize belief in God with our inability to identify his reasons for permitting evil, there remains a question as to why we have not been given a clear and unambiguous assurance by God that he has good reasons for allowing evil, which would be within our ability to understand.

A contemporary take on many of the arguments stated above comes from the Christian philosopher, Peter Kreeft, who teaches at Boston College. He offers several answers to the problem of evil and suffering, including:

God may use short-term evils for long-range goods;

God created the possibility of evil, but not the evil itself, and that free will was necessary for the highest good of real love. He argues that being all-powerful doesn't mean being able to do what is logically contradictory, for example, giving freedom with no potentiality for sin;

God's own suffering and death on the cross brought about his supreme triumph over the devil;

God uses suffering to bring about moral character since suffering can bring people closer to God.

So, it's clear from Peter Kreeft that the free will argument is alive and kicking. An interesting take on this argument comes from Gregory S. Paul, an American author and researcher. Paul estimates that at least 100 billion people have been born throughout human history starting with the first appearance of Homo Sapiens roughly 50, 000 years ago. He further estimates that the historical death rate of children throughout this time was roughly 50%, and that the deaths of these children were mostly due to diseases. This means that, throughout human history, over 50 billion human beings died naturally before they were old enough to give mature consent. He further estimates that as many as 300 billion humans may never have reached birth, instead dying naturally but prenatally.

Evil is one of the outcomes of evolution.

Finally, what about those who do not believe a god exists? Atheists usually state the problem of evil in the form of Epicurean-like dilemmas in several formulations:

First Formulation
1. If God is perfectly loving, He must wish to abolish evil.
2. If He is all powerful, He must be able to abolish evil.
3. But evil exists.
4. Therefore, an all powerful, loving God does not exist.

Second Formulation
1. God is the author of everything.
2. Evil is something.
3. Therefore God is the author of evil.

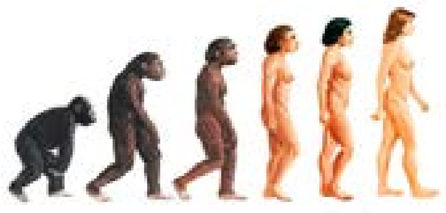
Third Formulation
1. God made everything perfect.
2. Imperfection cannot come from perfection.
3. Therefore perfectly created beings cannot be the origin of evil.
4. Therefore God must be the origin.

Fourth Formulation
1. If God is all good, He would destroy evil.
2. If God is all-powerful, He could destroy evil.
3. But evil is not destroyed.
4. Hence, there is no such God.

Conclusion: Rowe's fawn

William L. Rowe, a professor emeritus of philosophy at Purdue University, offers us his famous example of natural evil: "In some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering."

The question then becomes: Does the fawn's suffering matter to us? You may say, "No, the fawn is not human and the problem of evil only exists for creatures that possess a certain level of consciousness." That may be a reasonable response, but then I would ask you where you draw the line? Cro-Magnon man? Neanderthal? Homo erectus? Homo habilis? Australopithecus? Chimpanzee? How far down the evolutionary ladder would you be willing to go before saying, "The evil visited upon this creature doesn't matter?"



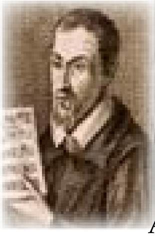
Or does it matter only for creatures who are cute and helpless? What if it was the family dog that somehow got lost in the burning forest? Your daughter's new kitten?

Let's stop there before we commit a logical continuum fallacy like the one that questions how many hairs it takes to make a beard and if you take away one hair, is the man then not bearded. But if we stop somewhere above the chimpanzee, with whom we share 96% of our genes, are we then saying that evil only matters in the remaining 4%? If you say yes, all living things are precious and shouldn't suffer unspeakable agony, then why does the fawn suffer so? Let's ask the question in the light of the explanations for evil that have been enumerated above. The fawn suffers unspeakable evil: because some distant fawn relative disobeyed God and ate an apple; or, to receive a greater reward in fawn heaven; or, to build fawn character; or, to nurture the fawn's spiritual growth; or, because … well, because we just don't know. Depending on one's religious leaning, this later might be expressed as: God works in mysterious ways; or, we can never know the greater plan; or, it's how the evolution of nature happened, but we don't really know why.

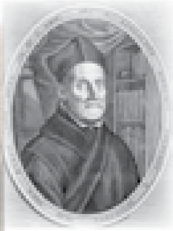
What can we do about it? In Francesca Allegri, the final word belongs to Paolo: "Look, Chicca, if you want to fight [it] you have two choices: You can raise an army … or you can adopt a cat."

A Gallery of Images

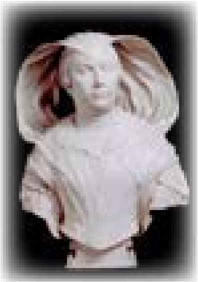
The Historical Characters



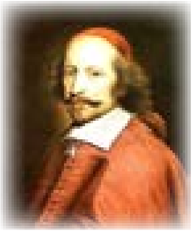
GREGORIO
ALLEGRI



ATHANASIUS
KIRCHER

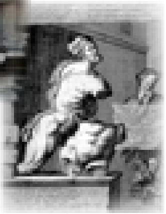


DONNA
OLIMPIA

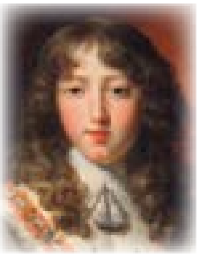


CARDINAL
MAZARIN

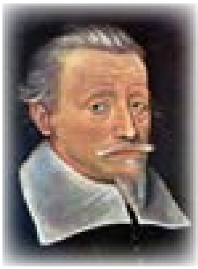
MARFORIO



PASQUINO



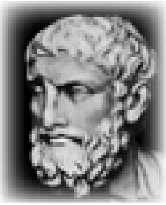
LOUIS XIV



HEINRICH
SCHÜTZ

Francesca’s Thought Leaders

FICINO



EPICURUS

PYTHAGORAS

MONTAIGNE, THE MAN

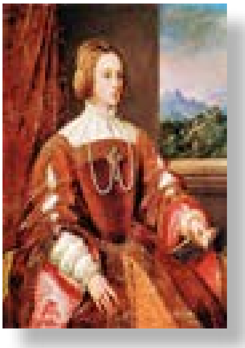
FIBONACCI

MONTAIGNE, THE CAT

BOCCACCIO

HILDEGARD
VON BINGEN

What sort of painting?



"What sort of pose do you have in mind?"

He paused. A mock sinister smile came to his face. "I can assure you it will be nothing like the portrait 'Isabel of Portugal' by Titian. Are you familiar with that painting?"

"I am. Very demure, a high ruffled collar hiding most of her neck."

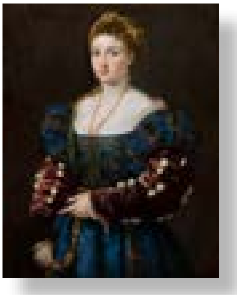
"Exactly. Your portrait will be nothing like that."

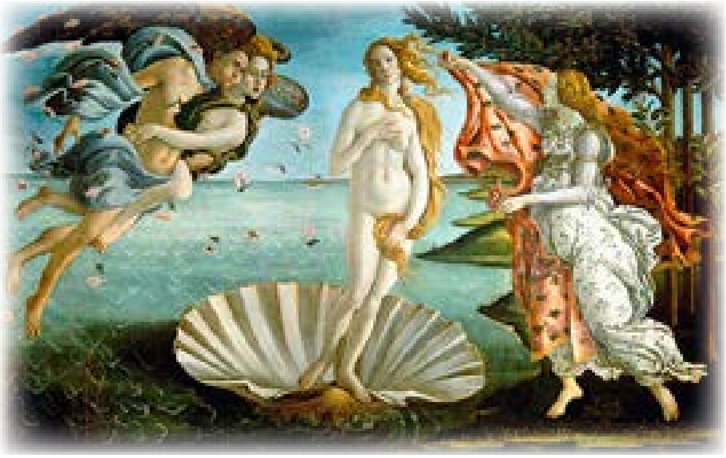
"What then? More exposure of the neck?" A heat came to her own neck as she said it.

"Quite a lot more."

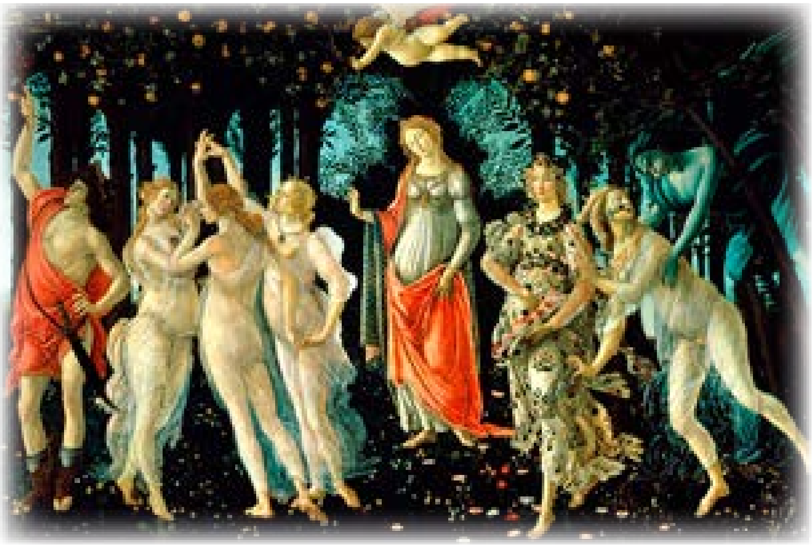
"Then perhaps like another of Titian's, 'La Bella,' where the neck and the shoulders are revealed?"

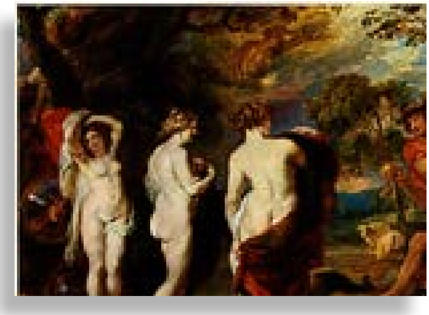
"Yes, and a good deal of the bosom," he said. "But no, not like that portrait either."

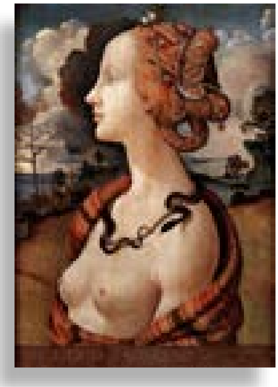




"Then I can't imagine what you might have in mind," she said shyly, "lest it be more like the 'Venus' of Botticelli, or the graces that surround Spring in his 'Primavera'. " She was shocked at her audacity and wished she could take the words back. "That is not what you have in mind … is it?"

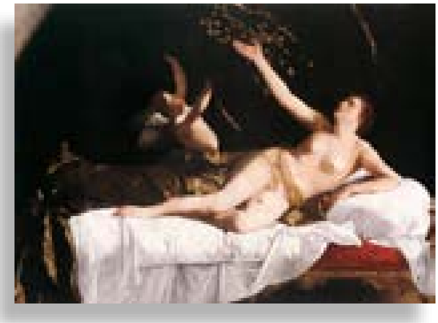




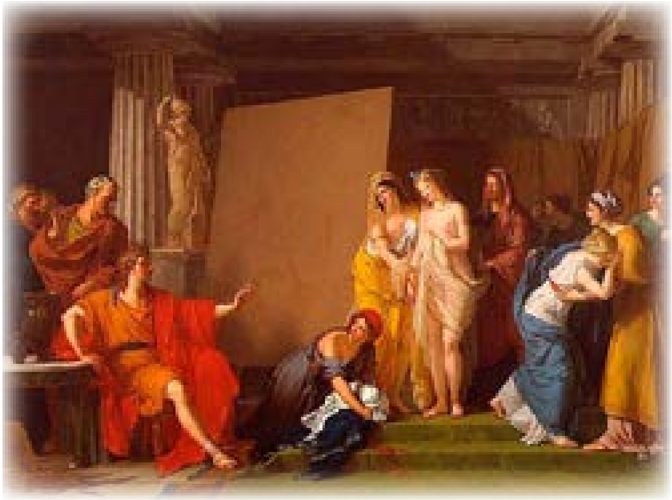


"True, many artists used courtesans, but not all. Rubens, for example, used his wife for Venus in his "Judgment of Paris." And Piero di Cosimo did a portrait of Simonetta Vespucci as Cleopatra that shows her bare-breasted. And you know who Simonetta was."

Francesca nodded. "A Florentine noblewoman."



"I should tell you also that Orazio Gentileschi posed his very own daughter, Artemisia, nude and I don't imagine he thought of his daughter as a courtesan.



"And what about the artist Zeuxis? Do you know of him?"

"Yes. A painter in ancient Heraclea."

"What do you know about him?"

Francesca smiled demurely. "He couldn't find a woman beautiful enough for his painting of Helen of Troy, so he inspected the girls of the city and chose four."

"The girls of the city; not courtesans. And so it is with me. Nobody but you is beautiful enough for my Venus and Ceres."

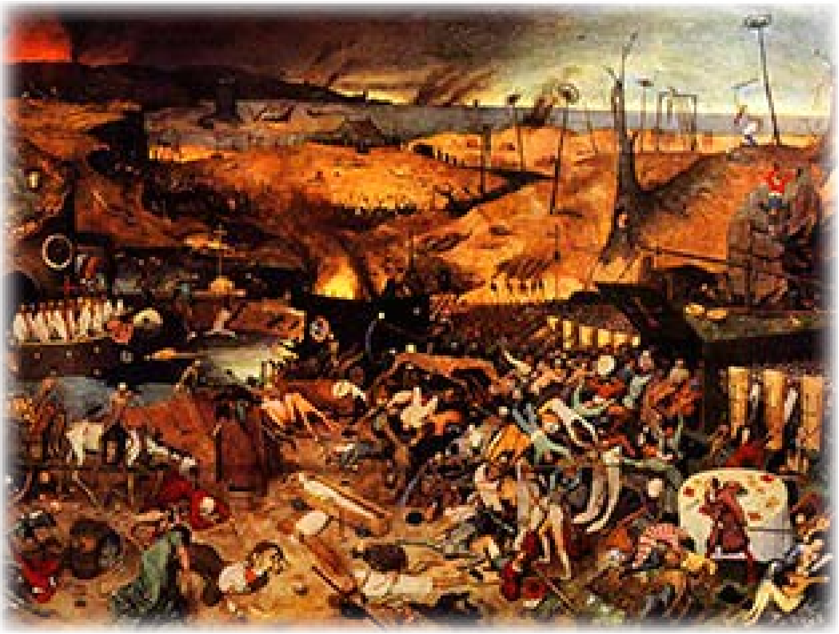
... and they talked about other painters, particularly Michelangelo Buonarroti. “I’ve seen the ceiling in the Sistine Chapel several times,” said Paolo. “Each time I’m amazed at the grandeur of his work. And he had to worry about a sponsor.”

“I agree about its grandeur,” replied Francesca. “But something about it disturbs me.”

“How can it possibly disturb you? It’s perfect in every way.”

“It’s truly magnificent, but every time I go to hear my uncle’s choir, I get a feeling there’s something not quite right with the ceiling. Perhaps it’s so great, it’s beyond my comprehension and that’s what troubles me.”

Paolo laughed. “No doubt. For a person with so much learning, it must be frustrating to encounter a mystery so great as to confound understanding.”



PIETER BRUEGEL, THE ELDER-"THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH"

It is a panorama of death.

In the upper left of the painting, the sky is a fiery red where it isn't blackened by the smoke of burning cities. The rest of the upper part of the scene is a dull green sea littered with burning and wrecked ships. Hordes of skeletons attack the living. Men hang from gallows. Others bend their necks under swords waiting for the fatal blow. Four men lay espaliered on body-breaking wheels, their limbs splayed wide. Presumably, before the moment captured by Bruegel, the wheels were turned to shatter the men's bones as their limbs were woven through the wheel's spokes—all this before the wheels were hoisted onto tall poles so birds could peck away at the victims.

Other men are having their throats slit, or are being drowned in wells, or are being hunted down by skeletal dogs. One skeleton on horseback wields a scythe at a crowd of people trying to escape through a tunnel above which is a thin cross pattée. Behind him, an inferno rages in the keep of a castle. An emaciated dog nibbles at the face of a child. Two other skeletal figures drive a wagon full of skulls. Another pair of skeletons, dressed in what might be brown scapulars of the Franciscan Order—though the artist's intention is unclear—haul a coffin on wheels in which lies a swaddled corpse. The coffin is being rolled directly over another swaddled corpse lying at right angles to it.

An army of skeletons marches on both sides of the tunnel behind large shields bearing the cross pattée. And on the other side of the painting two skeletons haul on ropes to ring bells that hang from the naked limbs of a tree. Presumably, they are tolling death. Below them, several skeletons, wearing white winding cloths like togas, stands with a crucifix observing the carnage.

Are there twelve of them? Francesca counted. Are they meant to be the apostles? She trembled as she gazed upon the painting. Vaguely, she was aware of the rhythmic sound of hammering, but she was unable to place it. As terrifying as the scene of death in its many faces was, what disturbed her most was what she saw in the lower right-hand corner of the painting.

There, a woman sits in satin skirts, a young man enfolded in her flowing robes. He is playing the lute and singing earnestly from the score of music she holds before his eyes. They seem completely oblivious to the slaughter going on around them. Behind them, a skeleton plays along, seemingly mocking them.