The Whisperers: Invidious Perspectives in Trecento Painting

Christopher S. Wood, *New York University, USA*

THE IMAGE PLACED ON AN ALTAR was typically frontal, symmetrical, and self-evident. Giotto himself did not violate this rule. Seeing as such was not problematized by altarpieces involving standing or enthroned figures facing forward. Off the altar, and especially in narrative scenes on the walls of church naves or chapels, Giotto and his followers edged beholders into more dynamic ways of looking. In the cycles at Assisi and Padua, or in the narrow chapels of Santa Croce, one is always shifting about to get the best angles on the scenes. The Presentation of Mary in the Temple by Taddeo Gaddi in the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce (1328–38; fig. 1) as well as the updated version by Giovanni da Milano in the Rinuccini Chapel in the same church (ca. 1370; see fig. 5 below) are both in the lower register of scenes. To see the scenes in the upper registers, however, one has to crane one's neck. *Seeing better* is a narrative theme in many of these scenes. Observing, witnessing, and contemplating, and point of view and viewing angle, are concerns shared by figures in the fictive scenes and the spectator in reality looking at the paintings.

Perspective itself correlates virtual and real beholding, so intensifying the thematization of seeing in the paintings. A perspectival construction posits a viewer who serves as the basis for the calculation of the foreshortenings. A real viewer of the painting, aware that the composition has been determined by this imaginary viewer, sees a picture of viewing itself.

Perspectives in fourteenth-century pictures were not mathematically generated but only estimated. Cennino Cennini at the end of that century described a simple way to create the illusion that depicted buildings and interior spaces possessed depth, involving the angling of architectural elements upward, downward, or sideways

Contact Christopher S. Wood at cw96@nyu.edu.

Figure 1. Taddeo Gaddi, *Presentation of Mary in the Temple*, Florence, Santa Croce, Baroncelli Chapel (1328–38). (Photo, Scala/Art Resource, NY.) Color version available as an online enhancement.

(*Il libro dell' arte*, sec. 87). This was the basic trecento method.[1] But even these rough-and-ready perspectives already established the transitive relation between beholder and picture. The angling of the architecture places a virtual beholder in an intelligible relation to the virtual world depicted in the painting. The "optical cube"—David Summers's term for Cennino's virtual box, adaptable to interiors and urban settings, created by tilting the ceiling, floor, and walls to create trapezoidal panels—"greatly increases the dependence of the virtual image upon . . . a *modelled* viewer." "The shape and size of the optical planes—the trapezoids—are directly dependent" on this modeled viewer. The optical cube "is developed quite simply and untheoretically." Nevertheless, when a scene is off center and so asymmetrical, as if the eye had moved to the side, the virtual space "reveals" its sensitivity to the modeled (not the real) beholder's least movements, as in the Confirmation of the Rule of

1. Marvin Trachtenberg, *Dominion of the Eye: Urbanism, Art, and Power in Early Modern Florence* (Cambridge, 1997), 166–84.

St. Francis by Pope Innocent III in the Bardi Chapel in Santa Croce.[2] In this way virtual beholders, although they do not appear, become characters in the narratives. Their perspectives on the events are their very own and are therefore as contingent as the point of view of any depicted character. A plausible virtual space even when constructed by eye and practice and not by geometry (as it would be in the fifteenth century) allowed for the description of physical and psychic interactions signaled by body language, gesture, and depicted gazes.

An artist equipped with Cennini's method (the optical cube) could rotate an entire scene in space, giving the virtual beholder not a frontal view on a building, for example, whereby the facade of the building would be parallel to the picture plane, but rather a view from an angle, suggesting that the beholder was perhaps just passing by and happened upon the event. The painter offers the rotated scene as a symbolic form of a dynamic social setting where one's access to events was contingent.[3]

The Presentation of Mary takes place on the threshold of the Temple in Jerusalem, in a liminal space between profane sphere and temple precinct. Taddeo Gaddi and Giovanni da Milano, amplifying motifs already introduced by Giotto in his rendering of the scene at Padua, created their crisscrossing sight lines because they wanted to describe a community as the setting for the event. In figure 1, Gaddi's chief rabbi, at the top of the stairs, is impassive, but the figure to his right raises a hand. One of the two bearded men at lower right raises a hand; the other gestures. Two women, more emotional, kneel in wonder. Two children are already comparing notes, like adults. Another child emulates Mary by placing a foot on the lowest step. A woman looks from a window. The virgins in the temple are agitated. The rotated perspectival box symbolizes this instability and the vulnerability of truth to opinion.

Perspective invited this cat's cradle of meaningful gazes. But perspective did not create the excitement: it was already present in the source texts. The narratives themselves, scriptural and apocryphal, register concerns about Mary's purity. The

2. David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (New York, 2003), 500, 499.

3. My approach, I hope, is not incompatible with the argument of Christopher Lakey, "From Place to Space: *Raumkästen* and the Moving Spectator in Medieval Italian Art," in *The Public in the Picture: Involving the Beholder in Antique, Islamic, Byzantine and Western Medieval and Renaissance Art*, ed. Beate Fricke and Urte Krass (Zurich, 2015), 113–36. But whereas Lakey is concerned with the way perspective guided the experience of real beholders in real space, I am suggesting that a component of that real beholder's experience of the work was (and is) her assessment of the differences between, on the one hand, the views onto the narrative scene of the foundational virtual beholder implied by any perspective construction and, on the other hand, the views that various figures depicted in the scene would have had. See also Julian Gardner, "The Decoration of the Baroncelli Chapel in S. Croce," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 34 (1971): 89–113, here 91, who says about the Presentation that from the supposedly ideal "viewing point in the transept the spectator has the sensation of looking straight up the steps and into the building itself."

temple and the clerics were essentially the monitors of ritual purity. The narratives and later the painters supplemented the doctrinal concerns with psychological and sociological inferences.

The Presentation of Mary in the Temple was an event not attested in scripture and whose underlying theme would seem quite inappropriate for an altarpiece. The story, first narrated in the apocryphal text known as the Proto-Evangelium of James, composed in Greek probably in the late second century, recounts Mary's parents' delivery of their child, at age three, into the care of the temple.[4] The text, widely translated in the East, told a story of humiliation, redemption, gratitude, indecision or even hesitation, and the sensitivity of the protagonists to public opinion. Prominent in the Proto-Evangelium is the theme of the suspicions of the community surrounding questions of fertility and purity. Much more widely read in the West, however, was the Infancy Gospel known as the Pseudo-Matthew, a Latin text composed between the mid-sixth and the late eighth century, but most likely in the first quarter of the seventh.[5] This text, although dependent on the Proto-Evangelium of James, suppressed some of the older text's speculations about motives, even while striving for a relatable emotional immediacy.

The problem with Mary was that she was supposed to have given birth to a child without sacrificing her virginity. There are traces in the Gospels of pagan and Jewish skepticism about this miracle. Joseph himself, understandably, took some convincing: when "Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, since he was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly" (Matt. 1:18–19).[6] According to John 6:42, some Jews asked, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?" Most strikingly, the gospel of Mark hints that even some Christians were uneasy about the story of the parentage:

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4. H. R. Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary* (Assen, 1965); Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, English trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1963–65), 1:370–88; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford, 1993; rev. ed., 2005), 48–67. Elliott is an update of M. R. James's classic *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses, with Other Narratives and Fragments* (Oxford, 1926).

5. Jan Gijsel and Rita Beyers, eds., *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Apocryphorum 9–10, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium*, ed. Jan Gijsel (Turnhout, 1997). On the dating of the Pseudo-Matthew, see Beyers's general introduction, p. 13, and Gijsel's introduction to the Pseudo-Matthew, p. 67. James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 70–79, and Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 84–100, give only partial translation and summaries. Alexander Walker, ed., *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, and Revelations* (Edinburgh, 1870), 16–52, is a full translation.

6. I cite the New American Standard Bible, generally considered the most literal English translation.

Mark 6:3 refers to Jesus as "the son of Mary," an unusual way of speaking of a man unless the identity of his father were in doubt.[7]

This penumbra of suspicion may explain why Mary is not a major figure in the Gospels. Mark names her only that one time. Matthew and Luke name her only in the birth and infancy narratives, in their chapters 1 and 2. Luke mentioned her one more time, at Acts 1:14. Christ's irritable rebuke at John 2:4, "What business do you have with me, woman?" hints at a certain tension within the inner circle.[8] The oldest New Testament texts, Paul's letters, never mention Mary by name at all. Her story, her poem one might say, was composed in the apocryphal texts, the religious drama, the devotional literature, prayer and song, and painting.

The concerns about the virgin birth did not subside. In his anti-Christian treatise *On the True Doctrine* (late 170s) the philosopher Celsus published apparently long-standing rumors about Christ's true parentage, namely, that his father was a soldier named Panthera and that the adulteress Mary was a poor girl of no standing. Celsus's text has not been transmitted to us intact, but it is extensively quoted by the third-century-scholar Origen in his refutation of the obstinate pagan, entitled *Against Celsus*.[9] The Proto-Evangelium of James, it has been argued, was written in direct response to Celsus.[10] An echo of Jewish skepticism about the parentage is also heard in the apocryphal Acts of Pilate, also known as the Gospel of Nicodemus (fourth century?), which reports that the Jewish elders said to Jesus, "You were born of fornication."[11]

The Pseudo-Matthew is more colorful in its representation of Joseph's skepticism:

> The virgins who were with Mary said to him: we know that no man has ever touched her. We know that integrity and virginity are still immaculate in her. She has always remained in God and in prayer. Every day an angel of the Lord speaks with her, every day she receives her food from the hand of the angel. How could there be any sin in her? Now, if you want us to reveal our suspicions, no one other than the angel of God has made her pregnant.

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7. See Austin Busch and Gerald Hammond, eds., *The English Bible: King James Version* (New York, 2012), 93. The phrase is altered by Matthew 13:55 and Luke 4:22.

8. "Woman" is an ordinary and civil form of address in the Bible, but it was unusual for a son to address his mother that way. See the notes to the passage in the New English Translation (NETBible).

9. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ed. and trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, 1980), 1.28, 32–34, 69. On Celsus, see Lily C. Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protoevangelium of James* (Tübingen, 2013), 35. On the concerns about the story of the virgin birth expressed by St. Jerome, see Beyers's general introduction to the *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, 14 n. 1.

10. Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi*, 15–16. Beyers, general introduction to the *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, 3.

11. Gospel of Nicodemus 2.3; Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 172.

Joseph said: why do you try to deceive me, and make me believe that an angel of the Lord has made her pregnant? It could be that someone pretending to be an angel of the Lord has seduced her. And having said this, he wept, and said: how will I show myself in the Temple of God? How will I face the priests?[12]

Canonical and apocryphal texts alike reveal a wider context for the historical doubts about the virgin birth, projecting the tension between Mary's family and the Jewish community back a generation. We will look at the evidence from Luke at a later point in the exposition. Meanwhile, note that the late ninth- or tenth-century Gospel of the Birth of Mary says about the fourteen-year-old Mary, still a virgin attendant in the temple before she ever met Joseph, that "the wicked could not find anything to reproach her with."[13] What possible charge could have been leveled against Mary at that point?

All this accumulated tradition eventually surfaced in the paintings. The apocryphal texts are the context for the traces of hesitation and agitation in Giotto and Taddeo Gaddi.

We will return later to this iconography, but first let us consider the iconographical double of the Presentation of Mary, namely, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, based on Luke. This scene combined two rituals into one: the Purification or symbolic readmittance of the mother to the community after her pregnancy, and the Presentation of the newborn male child to the Jewish priests, involving a symbolic ransoming of the child from future service as a priest. The scene lent itself to centralized, frontal presentation, placing you in the middle of the congregation, as it were, with an unobstructed, objective view. This was a scene with a long liturgical and pictorial tradition in the West.[14] Some modern Italian versions rotated the scene slightly—principally Giotto's, at Padua. But even Giotto's composition complied with the tradition in presenting only a stripped-down version of the cast of characters: Mary, Joseph, Christ, the holy man Simeon, the holy woman Anna, plus a maidservant (the latter figure is not included in such recent precedents as Pietro Cavallini's mosaic at Santa Maria in Trastevere). At Assisi, Giotto or his team rotated the scene back to frontality.

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12. Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew 10.1–2, in Gijsel, *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium*, 380–87.

13. Rita Beyers, ed., *Libellus de nativitate Sanctae Mariae*, in Gijsel and Beyers, *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, vol. 2, 7.3, pp. 302–3. See also 3.9, pp. 288–91. This text, attributed to Jerome, was based on the Pseudo-Matthew. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 120–21, gives it short shrift. However, its influence on art was great because it was absorbed into the Golden Legend.

14. Dorothy C. Shorr, "The Iconographic Development of the Presentation in the Temple," *Art Bulletin* 28 (1946): 17–32. See the account of the trecento iconography, with the stress on the role of the priests, near the beginning of Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1951), 16–20, and on the priests in the Presentation of Mary, 23–29.

Neither the source text nor the pictorial tradition provided a basis for the inclusion of skeptical or doubting figures in the Presentation of Christ. But over the course of the century they crept in, under the influence of the Presentation of Mary. The Tuscan painter Jacopo del Casentino, for example, introduces interaction between witnesses in his Presentation of Christ, a panel dated 1330 on the frame (but unreliably; fig. 2).[15] There on the left is the maidservant, next to Joseph. On the right are two men—elders of the community?—exchanging words and glances; they appear to confer privately. The body language of the bearded men bespeaks authority. Shapley suggests that the picture may have been the center of a polyptych.[16]

A more important picture is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Presentation of Christ in the Uffizi, dated 1342, originally placed on the altar of San Crescenzio in the Duomo of Siena (fig. 3). A bearded figure, a temple scribe, conveys his concerns to the chief rabbi directly.[17] Once perspective has opened up interior space into an infinity of potential sight lines—an image of perspective itself—then even a centered scene such as this one is dynamic in effect yet can still be mounted on an altar. The Sienese painters, in a series of landmark altarpieces in the duomo, were expanding the iconographic repertoire: the Annunciation by Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, the Birth of the Virgin by Pietro Lorenzetti, the Nativity by Bartolommeo Bulgarini.[18]

And why should an onlooker not hesitate? In the story of the Presentation, only Simeon, who was no rabbi, and Anna recognize the significance of the event. The rest of the community, to the extent they were present, is ignorant. Still, when modern painters introduced hints of discord into the Presentation of Christ, they were pushing the evidence, under the influence of the Presentation of Mary. The texts behind the Presentation of Mary, by contrast, contain plenty of such material—they are interested in human-scaled, "normal" psychology. This is why these texts are sometimes called "folkloric," even if in fact they were shaped by theological and ecclesiastical concerns (e.g., the Benedictine influence on the positive portrayal in the Pseudo-Matthew of Mary's "monastic" interlude in the temple).[19]

15. Richard Offner and Miklós Boskovits, *The Fourteenth Century*, in *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting*, ed. Richard Offner et al., sec. 3, vol. 2 (Florence, 1987), 428–31, say the inscription has been "repainted."

16. Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XIII–XV Century* (London, 1966), 1:24.

17. Hayden B. J. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation* (University Park, PA, 1997), 138–39, describes the temple scribe as "perturbed."

18. Henk van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces, 1215–1460: Form, Content, Function*, vol. 2 (Groningen, 1990), 99–139.

19. The description of Mary's life in the temple is the most significant difference between the Proto-Evangelium of James and the Pseudo-Matthew. Gijsel, introduction to the Pseudo-Matthew, in Gijsel and Beyers, *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, 1:57–58.

Figure 2. Jacopo del Casentino, Presentation of Christ in the Temple (1330?). 102 × 62 cm. (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, F61-59; photo, Nelson-Atkins Media Services.) Color version available as an online enhancement.

Figure 3. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Presentation of Christ in the Temple (1342). (Uffizi, Florence; photo, Google Art Project.) Color version available as an online enhancement.

Each episode, the Presentation of Christ and the Presentation of Mary, is about the coordination of familial existence with the requirements of the clerical establishment and, by extension, of the handed-down norms of the community. Each episode is shadowed by the irony that this family has produced, or will produce, the Messiah who will deauthorize the very temple and tradition from which the family now humbly seeks approval. And each episode raises the question of recognition, asking: Who at the time, involved in these rites, had any intimation of what was really happening?

When witnesses such as those in Ambrogio's composition come in pairs, they stand for a multitude: the community. Aby Warburg, describing Giotto's rendering of the Confirmation of the Rule of St. Francis in the Bardi Chapel, pointed to the two pairs, one in each side aisle, of "elderly, bearded men in voluminous cloaks [who] bear witness to the sacred scene on behalf of Christendom at large."[20] But the number two also raises the possibility of disagreement. A pair of conferees can represent the dividedness of a community. Giotto planted conferring women in the scene of the Feast of Herod in the Peruzzi Chapel. But the motif had appeared already in the Legend of St. Francis cycle at Assisi, for example, in the episodes of the Man in the Street Paying Homage or the Miracle of the Spring.

A pair of figures in consultation may even represent the internal psychic division of a single witness. The very need for testimony implies that there is disagreement in the community. The witness as a character represents the principle of an undivided private state of mind, which takes a side in the public disagreement. But we all know that one may be of two minds. In fourteenth-century painting, an exchange of words or glances conveys the concept of a divided consciousness. All the psychological complexity, the contingency, the subjunctive and conditional modes of thought, the prospectivity of mind, all this is outsourced, in painting, to the fictional, unnamed witness figures who are placeholders for all the undecided.

Asides or conferences at the Presentation of Christ, although unattested in the Gospel, are readily interpretable as expressions of skepticism or perturbation. Simeon, after all, had said: "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and as a sign to be opposed—and a sword will pierce your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34–35). And later Luke himself will remind us that scribes and Pharisees were hostile to Christ but could not hide their thoughts from him (Luke 5:21–22, 6:8). It is not surprising that the elders of the Temple would comment on the breach in the ritual entailed by the

20. Aby Warburg, "The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles, 1999), 185–221, here 188.

bestowal of unheard-of honor and attention on this seemingly undistinguished and impecunious family.

The textual evidence for the hypothesis that the initial reaction of the elders of the community to the Presentation of Christ was not welcoming but disapproving is only indirect. The apocryphal texts suggest that the community was predisposed to resent the family's privilege. The evangelist himself repeatedly insists that the parents of Jesus did everything they were expected by scripture, law, and custom to do (Luke 2:22–24, 27, 29, and 39). Five times within eighteen verses Luke mentions their compliance with the Law; protesting too much, surely. Why did Luke believe that the family's piety needed defending? Over this family hovered a cloud of doubt and suspicion. Already in the previous generation the same family had found itself in the crosshairs of censorious and mistrustful public opinion. Luke was aware of all this, and he is at pains to assure readers that the family arrogated to themselves no favored status but were eager to comply with the Law.

There is also a textual basis for a *positive* interpretation of the colloquies depicted in the paintings. The book of the prophet Malachi, chapter 3, verse 1, says "And the Lord, whom you are seeking, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming." These words appear on a scroll held by the figure of Malachi painted in the spandrels above the altarpiece in Ambrogio's Presentation in the Uffizi. Shorr even connects a later verse of the same chapter (Mal. 3:16) in the painting by Bartolo di Fredi in the Louvre, a work dependent on Lorenzetti, to the head priest, who writes in a book while listening to a gesturing elder at his side: "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened attentively and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and esteem His name."[21] Lorenzetti and, following him, Bartolo di Fredi seem to have used the motif of conferring elders to indicate that the significance of Simeon's recognition was understood at least dimly by some devout.

The Presentation of Mary had shallower roots than the Presentation of Christ, both in liturgy and in iconography.[22] The scene may be considered a doubling or calque of the Presentation of Christ. Yet now the influence was flowing in the opposite direction. When stories come in pairs in this fashion, it means that one does

21. Shorr, "Iconographic Development," 28.

22. The subject had a long liturgical history in the East but was introduced to the West only late— not before the fourteenth century, according to Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge dans l'Empire byzantin et en Occident*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1965), 2:19–20. See also Gertrud Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, vol. 4.2, *Maria* (Gütersloh, 1980), 67–72.

not have to choose between their slightly divergent versions of things. Each element in the pair is responsible for different meanings. Doubling with a difference is parallax vision: a way of expanding the narrative repertoire in order to acknowledge slight discrepancies in the overlay of meanings. In this doubled pictorial tradition, the apocryphal supplement is often more realistic, or cynical, about human nature than the Gospel.

Let us return now to the Presentation of Mary, where the communal doubts that shaped the dramas travel along the sight lines opened up by perspective. A modern subject, indeed. To understand the thread of concern with malevolent public opinion that pursues this family we must consider the episode, attested in the Gospel, of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth, cousins of Mary. Luke, just as he would when speaking of Mary and Joseph in his chapter 2, insisted in his first chapter on the law-abiding character of that family: "They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). Luke says that Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the temple and offer incense: "And meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and were wondering at his delay in the temple" (Luke 1:21). The text suggests that the people considered Zechariah, by tarrying in the temple, to be displaying unstable behavior. Now it happened that Zechariah's wife Elizabeth was unable to bear children, until one day at a very advanced age she became pregnant and said to herself: "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among people" (Luke 1:25). The baby is a boy: "Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her" (Luke 1:58). They rejoice, but they also interfere: "And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zechariah, after his father. And yet his mother responded and said, 'No indeed; but he shall be called John.' And they said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name'" (Luke 1:59–61). The people were watching and monitoring, as self-appointed "eyewitnesses and servants of the word," as Luke describes the sources he has relied on for his own narrative in chapter 1, verse 2.

The apocryphal gospels project such concerns into the story of the birth of Mary.[23] Of course, the authors who describe the Presentations in the Temple of Mary and Christ are justifying their protagonists' behavior within the context of the Jewish

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23. As noted, the Pseudo-Matthew and the Gospel of the Birth of Mary were the texts most widely known in the West. Beyers, however, in her general introduction to the *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, 4–6, argues that there may have been more Latin manuscripts of the Proto-Evangelium circulating than we think; she mentions, e.g., a thirteenth-century manuscript in the Bibliothèque Ste.-Geneviève in Paris

rituals and laws—only partly perpetuated by the Christian Church—that protected purity. But the texts, and later the paintings, represent those preoccupations in the medium of vivid and psychologically acute narration, so elevating doctrinal themes to a higher level of generality. According to these texts, the community also played a role in the narrative of the birth of Mary. When Joachim, the father of Mary, a rich man, tried to make an offering at the temple, he met resistance: "At the high holy days Joachim stood among those offering up incense to the Lord, preparing his offerings in the presence of the Lord. And the scribe of the temple, named Reuben, approached him and said: 'You do not have the right to be here among those offering gifts, because the Lord has not blessed you with a posterity in Israel.'"[24] Giotto depicted this scene at the start of his cycle in the Arena Chapel at Padua. Infertility was a source of shame, a sign of God's aversion. Such accounts and speeches are shadowed by an omnipresent "them," the community, an alert and mistrustful chorus. Later we are told that Joachim's wife Anna was, like Elizabeth, unable to bear children. She laments her condition, asking God: "You have allowed all the beasts of the earth, the serpents, the fish, and the birds, to give birth and enjoy their children. Am I alone excluded from the gift of your bounty?"[25]

Anna vows to give her child, if she is granted one, to the priests of the temple.[26] And the aged couple are indeed, at last, blessed with a child. The Pseudo-Matthew reports that "all their acquaintances and relatives rejoiced, such that the whole land and the peoples congratulated them on this good news."[27] The news dispelled the clouds of suspicion. But soon the time comes when Joachim and Anna must bring the girl to the priests. This is the moment depicted in the paintings by Giotto and subsequently in both the Florentine and the Sienese traditions. The Proto-Evangelium—

(ms. 2787). See Jean-Daniel Kaestli, "Le Protévangile de Jacques en latin: État de la question et perspectives nouvelles," *Revue d'histoire des textes* 26 (1996): 41–102.

24. Pseudo-Matthew 2.1; cf. Proto-Evangelium 1.2.

25. Pseudo-Matthew 2.2; cf. Proto-Evangelium 3.1, where the lament is in verse: "For I was born a curse before them all and before the children of Israel / And I was reproached, and they mocked me and thrust me out of the temple of the Lord."

26. Pseudo-Matthew 2.2; cf. Proto-Evangelium 4.1, 6.1. In the Gospel of the Birth of Mary (*Libellus de nativitate Sanctae Mariae*), 4.1, an angel instructs Anna to give her daughter to the temple. The Proto-Evangelium, psychologically searching, says that the parents were expected to hand her over at age two but that Anna deferred the handover by a year, effectively deceiving the priests. See Vuong, *Gender and Purity*, 97 and n. 106, on the ritual and mishnaic grounds for this decision, lying behind the "folkloric" surface. The Proto-Evangelium, 7.1–7.2, also reports that Joachim called on the "undefiled daughters of the Hebrews" to hold burning torches to prevent the child from turning back. Pseudo-Matthew 4.1 does not mention the parents' hesitation or ruse. Instead they bring her at age three and she runs straight up the steps, without looking back or calling to her parents as children habitually do. Everybody was stupefied ("omnes stupor tenebat"), even the priests.

27. Pseudo-Matthew 3.5; cf. Luke 1:58, regarding Elizabeth. Proto-Evangelium 5.1 speaks of Joachim's justification; the Latin texts do not, however.

but not the later Latin texts—says that the high priest kissed and blessed Mary and placed her on the third step of the altar, where "she danced with her feet, and the whole house of Israel loved her."[28] The artists do not depict this rejoicing at the Presentation of Mary. In the paintings it never looks like the "whole house of Israel loved her." For Anna's speech at this crowning moment, as reported by the Pseudo-Matthew, is ambiguous. Echoing scripture, she announces that "God has opened his ears to our prayers and has dismissed the insults of our enemies. The sterile one has become a mother and has made exultation and joy in Israel. I am able to offer my gifts to the Lord, and my enemies could not hinder me."[29] Are the "enemies" beyond Israel or within?

In Giotto's depiction of the scene at Padua, the temple is tilted 30 degrees with respect to the picture plane (fig. 4).[30] At left, Joachim speaks with a bystander. Anna pushes Mary up the steps. The porter behind her may be carrying offerings. The temple virgins in the loft goggle like schoolgirls. At the right, two men exchange remarks. We are excluded by the broad cloaked back, a symbol of the man's closedness to the truth. But one could also argue that the man is thinking and talking and therefore open to possibilities. After all, the famous mourning women crouching in the foreground of Giotto's Padua Lamentation are also block-like, monadic.

In Taddeo Gaddi's Presentation in the Baroncelli Chapel, the temple itself has grown, and there are more supernumeraries or "extras" (fig. 1). In the 1360s, Giovanni da Milano rendered the scene in the Rinuccini Chapel in Santa Croce (fig. 5). Here the temple virgins are exuberant. Men, women, even children pair off, exchanging glances and words. Again, these pairs are not really pairs but individuals, split. Suspicions are signaled by a complicit pair, like a pair of lips or a pair of eyes, a figure of the indivisible person now divided by misgivings.

The pairing of sacred and profane witnesses is shorthand for a public. In the upper section of an illumination in one of the earliest manuscripts of the Revelations of St. Bridget of Sweden, Bridget receives her book straight from Christ, and with the other hand relays it to her male confessors, the clerics who will present her book to the public (fig. 6).[31] Below, the confessors present the book to a row of nine enthroned kings and queens; the one in the center is perhaps the emperor. On a lower

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28. Proto-Evangelium 7.3.

29. Pseudo-Matthew 5.1.

30. On the Italian renderings of this scene before Giotto, see Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge*, 2:113–14. The most important, perhaps relaying a source known also to Giotto, is the scene in the margin of the Madonna di San Martino in the Museo Nazionale di San Matteo Pisa (late thirteenth century). Adolfo Venturi, *Storia dell'arte italiana*, vol. 5 (Milan, 1907), figs. 41 and 52.

31. Fabian Wolf, *Die Weihnachtsvision der Birgitta von Schweden: Bildkunst und Imagination im Wechselspiel* (Regensburg, 2018), 202 n. 1134, 258.

Figure 4. Giotto, Presentation of Mary in the Temple, Padua, Arena Chapel (1303–5). (Photo, Wikimedia Commons.) Color version available as an online enhancement.

level two communities are pictured: laity on the left, and clerics on the right. Between them, seated on the ground, is an enigmatic pair: a woman who gestures and talks and a hooded female figure. Because they converse, comment, and discuss, this pair stands for the public. As so often in trecento painting, the entirety is represented by a polar binarism: one figure signifies the profane sphere, the other the sacred. Sacred plus profane equals the whole community.[32]

The Sienese painters developed the subject of the Presentation of Mary. Their model was a composition by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, part of a Marian series painted on the facade of the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala.[33] The centered composition

32. Such renegotiations of the relation between the sacred and the profane are a theme of my forthcoming book, *The Embedded Portrait: Giotto, Giottino, Angelico* (Princeton, NJ, 2023).

33. Those paintings had completely deteriorated by the eighteenth century, but a predella by Sano di Pietro (1449), now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana (inv. no. 40136), is thought to reproduce their compositions. Hayden B. J. Maginnis, "The Lost Façade Frescoes from the Ospedale di S. Maria della Scala in Siena," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 51 (1988): 180–94, fig. 2. Sano di Pietro's scenes are horizontal
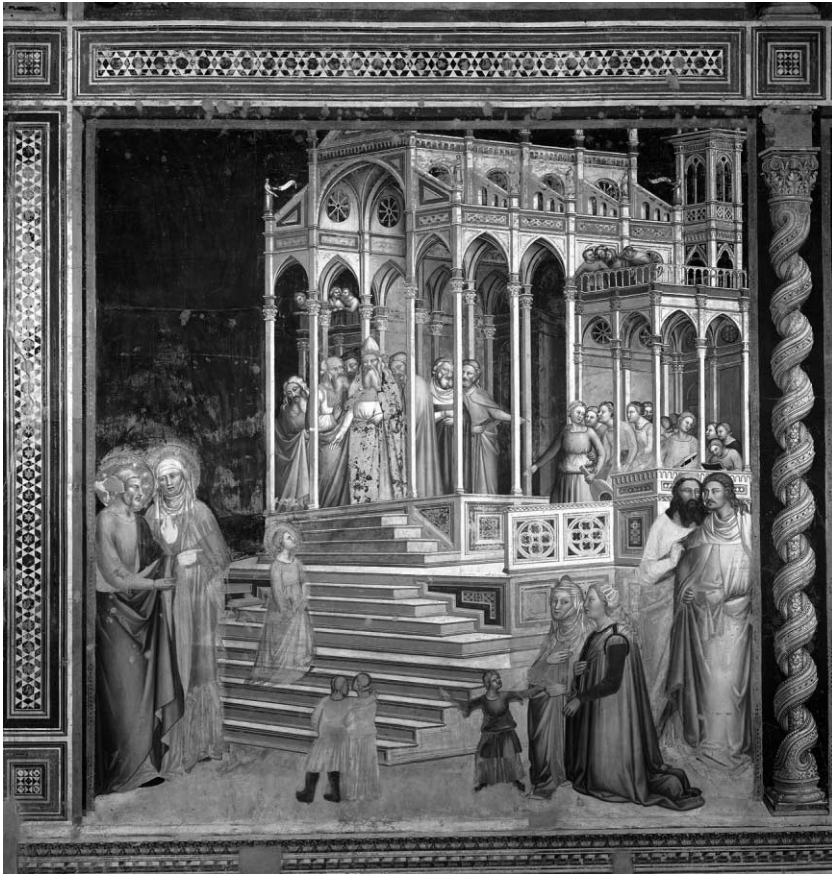
Figure 5. Giovanni da Milano, *Presentation of Mary in the Temple*, Florence, Santa Croce, Rinuccini Chapel (ca. 1370). (Photo, Scala/Art Resource, NY.) Color version available as an online enhancement.

duplicates the original centering enacted by the altar. No altar is mentioned or required by the story. However, the introduction of the central altar of the temple asserts the rhyme of the story with the Presentation of Christ and prepares the image of the apocryphal episode for placement on a real altar, as a retable. These are essentially indoor scenes, no longer picturing the dynamic context of the city, as the Florentine tradition had. The street is imported into the temple, its contingencies

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in format; it is possible that Ambrogio's were vertical. Ambrogio's Ospedale *Presentation of Mary* may have closely resembled his own Uffizi *Presentation of Christ*: a symmetrical, hexagonal temple in a central plan, seen head-on (fig. 3).
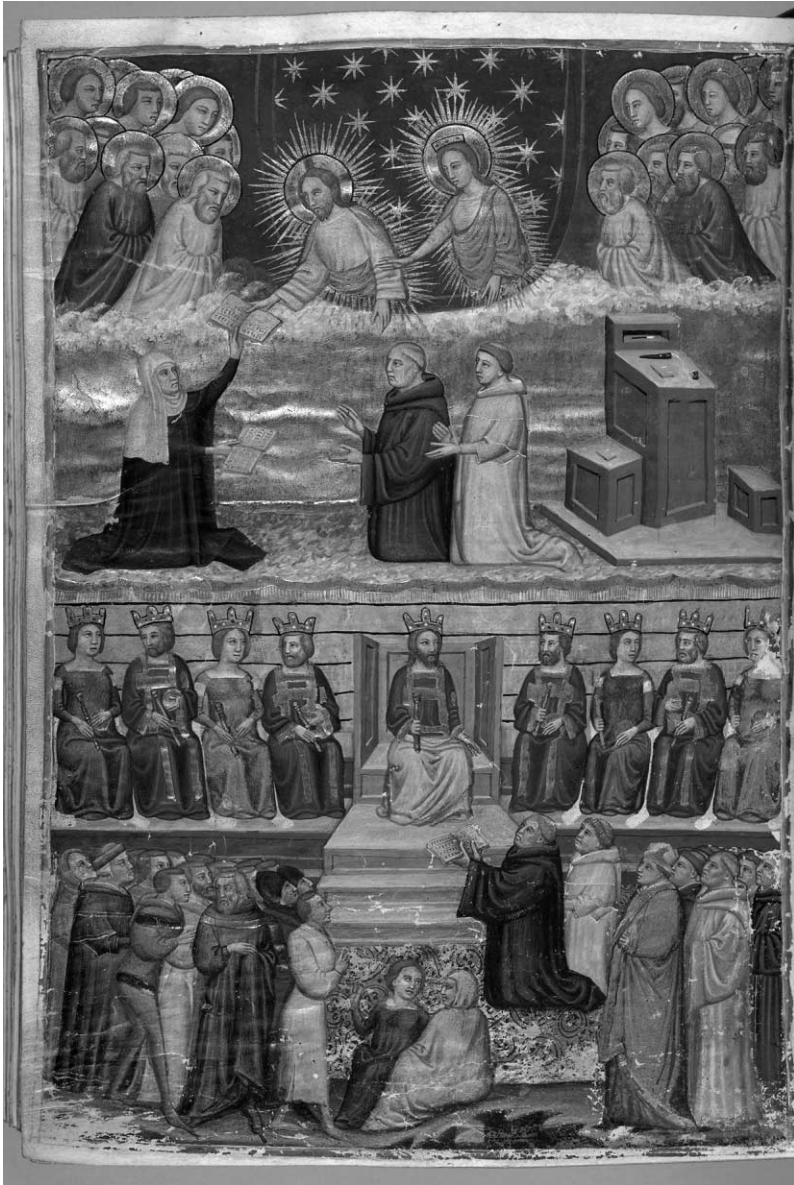
Figure 6. Revelations of St. Bridget, Presentation of the Book, Naples, 1377/78. (Morgan Library, New York, MS M.498, fol. 343v; photo, Morgan Library and Museum, New York.) Color version available as an online enhancement.

now conveyed by the crossfire of gazes. All the later Sienese Presentations of Mary follow Lorenzetti in making room at the sides for kibitzers (the Ospedale fresco had a pair of female conferees at the left, a pair of males at the right) and room in the sanctuary, near the altar, for a clutch of temple virgins.[34] Within the conversations surface the real, the everyday, and the commonsensical. These observers are not distracted; they are intent. They are simply creating their own alternative centers of attention that compete with the ritual. The prosaic and the profane are nested within the poetic and the sacred. The pairings of conferees are presented as symmetrical and balanced, but the modern beholder knows that ultimately the framing sacrality will neutralize the embedded profanity. In the end, we know, the doubts will be dispelled and the binarism will be collapsed.

The Presentation of Mary by Paolo di Giovanni Fei, now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, was the largest depiction of the episode up to that point, as far as we know, on a panel, not to mention the earliest surviving altarpiece dominated by this subject (fig. 7).[35] Michael Mallory published documents attesting that Paolo was paid in 1398–99 for a painting in the chapel of San Pietro in the Duomo at Siena.[36]

We are looking toward the apse of what appears to be a Gothic church. It would be difficult to draw a coherent ground plan of this structure. On the stepped

34. In the fresco by Lippo Vanni in San Leonardo al Lago, Siena (1360s), there are two teams of two on the left, a pair of monitors behind the altar, and more pointing and debating at the right. In the version by Niccolò di Buonaccorso in the Uffizi, a cluster of witnesses disintegrates at its edges into groups of two who consult and trade tales, opening up bubbles of privacy and complicity inside the public space. Giulietta Chelazzi Dini, Alessandro Angelini, and Bernardina Sani, *Pittura senese* (Milan, 1997), 191, 211.

35. Meiss attributed the work to Paolo di Giovanni Fei in 1951: *Painting in Florence and Siena*, 28 n. 58, and fig. 165 (the attribution appears only in the picture caption). Van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces*, 136–37. Miklós Boskovits, *Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Washington, DC, 2016), 104–11, no. 13, says that the original shape must have been rectangular with gables, cut in the nineteenth century to fit an arched frame. There would have been wooden columns separating the three parts.

36. Michael Mallory, *The Sienese Painter Paolo di Giovanni Fei (c. 1345–1411)* (New York, 1976), 122–28. Enzo Carli, *Il Duomo di Siena* (Genova, 1979), 85, agrees with Mallory's interpretation of the documents. Later inventories—the painting stayed in that chapel until at least 1482 and was probably moved or sold in 1582—describe a "Presentation of Mary with Saints Peter and Paul and other saints." On this basis it is believed that there used to be side panels. There is also a record of a payment to Bartolo di Fredi in 1393; it is thought that perhaps this was for the side panels. See the discussion in van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces*, 136–37. But the reference to Peter and Paul in the inventories could have been a careless misidentification of the bearded men in the central panel, at the sides. Note that Giorgio Ghisi and Hieronymus Cock identified the subject of Raphael's School of Athens in the Stanza della Segnatura as Paul Teaching in Athens; Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York, 2010), 361–62.

Figure 7. Paolo di Giovanni Fei, Presentation of Mary in the Temple (1398). 146.1 × 140.3 cm. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1961.9.4; photo, National Gallery of Art.)

platform in the center of the sanctuary are two block-like forms—elements of a low screen?—and behind the priests a columnar, pinnacled tabernacle.[37] Between the pillars of the arcade marking the limit of this central zone runs a low wall, interrupted below the central arch to provide access. Mary, having mounted the steps of the temple, folds her arms and looks back at her parents, who are standing at the left, framed by the leftmost arch, and with haloes, and partially masking three

37. On the tabernacle in this painting, and on depictions of similar imaginary structures in the Renaissance, see Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago, 2011), 214. The depicted tabernacle, just by differing in appearance from a normative Christian altar, calls attention to the overlap between the painting and its real setting and, therefore, the perfect frontality of the painting (never mind that this painting did not sit on the duomo's high altar).

further onlookers at the far left edge. I believe Mary's gesture must be interpreted as one of childlike obstinate protest and not, say, satisfaction.[38] Evidence for this is the temple virgin with crossed arms in the version by Andrea di Bartolo.[39] The temple virgins—see below—were irritated by Mary's ceremonial induction. Moreover, in Paolo's painting, the chief rabbi seems to encourage Mary while a second rabbi makes a gesture of exasperation (fig. 8). Anna gestures as if speaking; Joachim reaches out his hand, but toward whom? Is he addressing the elders on the opposite side of the picture, responding to their imputations, as implied by the pointing thumb of the man in the white hood? In a balcony or tribune on the right are eight young women, the temple virgins, holding prayer books. Two children in front, at the base of the stairs, gesture and confer. A figure in green, partially blocked by the pillar, kneels in recognition.

The conferees are the witnesses required to ratify any ritual, but they break out of character to comment and judge. They are members of the chorus who abandon a ritually determined role as witness in order to compare what they see with what they have heard, to confront the plain fact of the ritual before their eyes with a tale borne in from the street. In telling tales, they add tales to the tales. The stories have been imported into the sanctuary from the street; the sanctuary has also become the incubator of rumor before it breaks free in the street. Admittedly, an expression of surprise as a response to the remarkable and noteworthy is not necessarily coded negatively—think of the two onlookers, one of them with raised hand, at the far left of the Confirmation of the Stigmata of St. Francis in the Bardi Chapel. One of these figures was identified by Vasari as a portrait by Giotto of Arnolfo di Cambio.[40]

Other scenes that over the course of the trecento suffered conferring bystanders were the Ascension and the Pentecost; the Nativity, too, with its conversing midwives.[41] More obvious and less interesting are the commentaries accompanying the Resurrection of Lazarus.[42] The more significant gesturing and muttering onlookers

38. Or humility—this is what Boskovits says in *Italian Paintings*, 107.

39. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, inv. no. 1939.1.41. Boskovits, *Italian Paintings*, 14–25, no. 2. This is one of four surviving panels from an altarpiece.

40. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence, 1906), 1:291.

41. Barnaba da Modena, Ascension, Capitoline Museum, Rome, PC 347. The apostles at left and the two haloed women at right exchange words: questions or just marveling? Andrea da Firenze, Pentecost, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella. Jacopo di Cione, Pentecost, from the San Pier Maggiore altarpiece, in the National Gallery, London, inv. no. 578. Taddeo Gaddi, Nativity, Thyssen Collection, Madrid.

42. Giovanni da Milano, Resurrection of Lazarus, Rinuccini Chapel, Santa Croce.

Figure 8. Paolo di Giovanni Fei, Presentation of Mary in the Temple, detail. Color version available as an online enhancement.

in the paintings are not those who refuse to accept miracles but rather those who are unmoved or unpersuaded by the tableaux generated by ritual. In the temple, the skeptical onlookers reject the rhetoric of spectacle and instead withdraw into the sphere of discourse, or conversation.

The whisperers do not *con-template*. Latin *contemplari* meant to mark out a space for observation, as an augur does. The *templum* is consecrated ground reserved for such observations. The temple is a place where you can see in any direction.[43] To *contemplate* is to see in the way that the temple guides you to see. The temple is a place marked off in order to serve as a field for seeing. The function of the temple is to organize vision and attention. The "bad form" of the divided psychology (the profane competing on equal terms with the sacred) was acceptable in narrative frescoes, where the outcome was always deferred to the next panel in the narrative cycle. But an altarpiece must sum things up. On the altar, the profane will finally have to be assigned its proper place. The prosaic, divisive discourse—bad form, one might say, on the level of content—had to be compensated for by pattern or good form. An artwork may assign beauty to the task of dominating the bad content.

When painters seek to show the world just as it looks, minimally coded, they also learn what they cannot show: the hidden innermost zones of experience. At the margins of the rituals, onlookers exchange words that can never be overheard. Painting cannot relay words. This muteness is both a strength and a weakness of the art of painting: a strength, because iconic silence confers an automatic enigmaticalness; a weakness, because the shafts of light sent by the painted image into the soul do not carry very far. The limits of painting's capacity to disclose are disguised, however, by its beautiful surface. The beauty of the painting is a decoy. Those who wish to recruit painting for a more thorough realism would do well to turn their eyes away from the bright surface, whose desirability seems so plain and ineluctable, and instead take a few tentative steps down the rabbit holes of discourse, marked by the whisperers, into the labyrinth of words, whose meaning is never so plain as a picture. To resist the draw of the paintings is to resist confusing their apparently innocent beauty with their truth-value, exactly as the gossipers in the painting resist the draw of the ritual.

Here the stress is on the so-called temple virgins, not a historical reality of the first-century Temple in Jerusalem but an invention, a fancy.[44] In the mezzanine or singing gallery lodges envy. We learn from the Pseudo-Matthew that when Mary was chosen to weave the purple veil for the temple, her envious cohort, the other virgins of the temple, mocked her as *Regina Virginarum*, the Queen of the Virgins: "they cast lots among themselves to know what each should do, and this is how it

43. A. Ernout and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris, 1967), 681–82.

44. Pseudo-Matthew 8.1: "Since this temple was built by Solomon, the daughters of kings, prophets, high priests and priests have resided here; and they were great and admirable." See Gijsel, *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium*, 322 n. 3, on the fiction that small girls were handed over to the Jewish Temple, introduced by the Proto-Evangelium of James (although speaking as if Mary were the only one).

happened that Mary received the purple fabric to weave for the veil of the Temple of the Lord. And when she had got it, the virgins said: 'Seeing that you are the youngest and most humble of origin, did you deserve to obtain the purple?' And saying this, by way of mocking her, they began to call her Queen of the Virgins."[45] In the Presentation by Paolo di Giovanni Fei, the counterstories about the family lodge in the crevices in the painting, cracks in the surface of appearance so much more conspicuous now that the scene has been recentered and made symmetrical. In the microclimates of gossip, the storytelling imagination flourishes. In these confined spaces, "one" or "they," the impersonal source of the gossip's information, has a lot of authority. Hearsay is powerful precisely because it does not name its authority.

The painting identifies a countermyth thriving at the margins of the main myth. This countermyth is barely audible, disenchanted, contained but virulent, and involves an oblique, regressive form of desire. The whisperers or conferees resent the family's privileges and their good luck. The evangelists will assure us that envy motivated the Jews to deliver Christ to the Romans: Mark 15:10 says that Pilate "was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy (διὰ φθόνον)." Here in the story of Mary's Presentation we are dealing with sentiments less murderous but already taking on the structure of envy.[46] Pseudo-Matthew emphasizes the priests' recognition of Mary's singularity—she alone among the temple virgins considered the maintenance of chastity a greater service to God than fertility. They know her as the most pious, humble, and generous of the inmates.[47] This was the source of the envy.

Not too many years later, the claims of the modern holy woman Margery Kempe to have experienced Christ, and her emotional public displays of piety, met with the ill will of the community. Her autobiographical *Book* speaks of "the rumowr and grutchyng [grudging, complaining] of the pepyl agen hir." The vicar of St. Stephen's in Norwich had to defend Margery against the complaints raised against her by "the sterying [stirring] of envyows pepyl."[48]

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45. Pseudo-Matthew 8.5. According to Gijsel, *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium*, 374 n. 1, this is likely to be the earliest reference to Mary as Queen of the Virgins. The original Latin text has "haec dicentes in fatigationis sermone coeperunt eam virginum regina appellare." B. Harris Cowper, *The Apocryphal Gospels and Other Documents Relating to the History of Christ* (London, 1867), 43–44, translates "as though in a vexatious speech." The original Latin text has "haec dicentes in fatigationis sermone coeperunt eam virginum regina appellare." *Fatigatione* means fatigue, but Lewis and Short give an additional idiomatic and postclassical meaning: jeer or banter. Gijsel translates the word as "par raillerie."

46. See also Matt. 27:18 and James 4:5.

47. Pseudo-Matthew 8.1, 6.2–6.3. Compare the Proto-Evangelium of James 11.1: Mary was told by a mysterious voice, before her encounter with the angel, that she was "highly favored" and "blessed among women."

48. Lynne Staley, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1996), I. 17, 51–52.

The evil eye is the envying eye.[49] In the parable of the vineyard, the owner of the vineyard asks the disgruntled laborers: "is your eye envious because I am generous?" (Matt. 20:15).[50] Envy is the perception of the other as whole and replete. The envying eye is evil because it marks a withdrawal of the gazer from a community defined by a simple collective recognition of the good. This withdrawal re-creates that gazer as one who sees others first as others, as beings whose every possession is one's own lack. There is no eye that blesses, Jacques Lacan observed in his discussion of the invidious gaze.[51]

The multiplication of points of view and competition among points of view begin as soon as you withdraw psychologically from the ritual, when you step out of role and reoccupy yourself, when you turn your head away from the spectacle prepared by the priests, and when you begin to talk to your neighbor. You withdraw, momentarily, from participation in the ritual. You refuse, just for a moment, to allow the ritual to do your believing for you.

The concept of envy is inseparable from the concept of the image, whose basic feature is an effect of wholeness. The family is replete in their appearance of blamelessness, piety, and strict compliance with the customs and laws. The ritual of Purification, like the sacrament of marriage, is an imagistic, integrating machine and, therefore, an envy-generating machine. It is this fiction of the completeness and satisfaction of the other that triggers envy and drives the envier to look intensely, *in-videre*. The Latin is rendered by an archaic sense of the English word "to overlook": to look too intensely. But evil intent is also sometimes expressed by the metaphor of indirection: to cast the evil eye is to look askance. Martin Luther translated ὀφθαλμός πονηρος in Matthew 20:15 as "siehst du darum so scheel?" (do you see so crooked or squinting?). The envier casts the malevolent regard of one who longs for what the other has, especially the other's apparent self-sufficiency. For that completeness is no more or less than what the envying one thinks he lacks.[52] And so you relay some tale that casts a shadow over the family's pure and perfect image.

Victor I. Stoichita in a brilliant recent essay interprets the woman in black in Giotto's Meeting of Joachim and Anna at the Golden Gate, in the Arena Chapel

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49. See Alan Dundes, *The Evil Eye: A Casebook* (Madison, WI, 1992); and Peter Walcot, *Envy and the Greeks: A Study of Human Behavior* (Warminster, 1978).

50. Here the New American Standard Bible is not so literal, translating πονηρος (cunning, evil) as "envious" (the Vulgate has *nequam*, "vile").

51. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York, 1978), chap. 9, 115: "It is striking, when one thinks of the universality of the function of the evil eye, that there is no trace anywhere of a good eye, of an eye that blesses. What can this mean, except that the eye carries with it the fatal function of being in itself endowed . . . with a power to separate."

52. On envy and sight, see Dante, *Purgatorio* 13:28ff., 100–54; 14:1–139.

in Padua, as one who casts the evil eye. This figure, Stoichita argues, is the "solitary representative of a covert hostility." She is a "construction" prompted by the "textual suggestion of a phantasm"—a jealous onlooker, perhaps a widow, who does not participate in the general *gaudium*.[53] Anna herself had been a "widow," and then an infertile wife, as she says at the Golden Gate.[54] And even Anna had succumbed to envy, in the lament about her own infertility in Pseudo-Matthew 2.2. Andrew Ladis developed a similarly negative view of the famous figure in black—calling her the "great interrogative"—and moreover discusses envy and its association with Judas as well as other "malignant bystanders."[55]

Envy is apparently other-directed, but in fact it is about yourself. Giotto captured the recursive structure of envy in his Arena Chapel allegory: out of the mouth of a hideous woman emerges a serpent that immediately turns back on her. Your desire to be as complete and content as another person is a desire that, once thwarted, as it must be, flips over into the desire to destroy that person. Envy is the perspective of bad form looking back at an image of wholeness. The envier imagines what he himself looks like from the point of view of the fulfilled person. Envy is a countermode to devotional seeing, which beholds completeness without envy. Melanie Klein argued that the envious eye that we remark in others is no less than our own externalized, repudiated bad self.[56] The self attempts to right itself by imputing envy to others. According to Freud, the one who possesses something "valuable and fragile" (the Christian, in the world of this painting) projects onto others (the Jews) "the envy he would have felt in their place."[57] The overlap between the real society and a virtual depicted society, between scriptural Jews and modern envy, is disclosed by the association of Jews and jewelry. Italian Jewish women in late Middle Ages either wore earrings or were said to wear earrings by anti-Judaic preachers. Diane Owen Hughes has suggested that Sienese depictions of the Presentation of Christ that outfit Mary with earrings were stressing her Jewish identity and need for purification.[58] An example is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Presentation of Christ in the Uffizi,

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53. Victor I. Stoichita, "Giotto—the Eye and the Gaze," in *The Right Moment: Essays Offered to Barbara Baert* (Leuven, 2021), 147–80, here 166, 169.

54. Pseudo-Matthew 3.5. By "widow" she means that Joachim, when rebuked by the temple for his failure to produce a child, had abandoned her and fasted for forty days in the wilderness.

55. Andrew Ladis, *Giotto's O: Narrative, Figuration, and Pictorial Ingenuity in the Arena Chapel* (University Park, PA, 2008), 19–27, 39–41, 53–85.

56. Cited in Lawrence Di Stasi, *Mal Occhio (The Evil Eye): The Underside of Vision* (San Francisco, 1981), 55.

57. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London, 1955), 240.

58. Diane Owen Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs: Earrings, Jews, and Franciscan Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance City," *Past and Present* 112 (1986): 3–59, here 3–6. Hughes relates this to Ambrogio's

where Mary herself and the woman in red and yellow behind her wear large earrings (fig. 3).

Grief or fear may be collective and contagious, but envy is deeply rooted in the self. Envy is misrecognition, fantastical and deluded. But it takes the form of a skeptical desublimation and so is congruent with a liberating mistrust of hierarchy, privilege, and ritual. This positive, emancipatory role in subject constitution, against the imperative of centralized perspective and the established priests, is the productive aspect of envy.

Gossip is a medium of envy. Gossip relays personal emotions, person to person. But gossip is an impersonal mode of speech because it pretends to have no source. Statements circulate that seem to have no particular source of authority. "It is said": such a phrase prefaces what Aristotle called apophantic statements, predicative statements. They are supposedly not products or expressions of any particular person's state of mind. The point of view of gossip is the point of view of what Martin Heidegger called "das Man" (*man* in German is the impersonal subject, the equivalent of French *on*.) *Das Man* produces what he calls idle talk (*Gerede*).[59]

Gossip flourishes in subcommunities that reproduce the values of the overall community. Even so, some of the critical potential of gossip survives, detached from the individual psyche. *Gerede*, idle talk, is fallen speech, but it is necessary. It is the character of our condition in the world. Idle and even envious talk is the prose at the margins of poetry, against which poetry marks itself off. The women who comment, exercising a simple, plain intelligence, are speaking prose. They offer a prosaic parody of the poetic myths that underwrite ritual. Such parodies are not superfluous but are the interpretations that myth users append to myth. Contrast this participatory, additive concept of myth to the crushing, confiscating acknowledgment of God demanded of Christians. If Mary is a poem, Christ is a command.

The confusion between idle talk and myth interpretation arises at the margins of the community, where sacred and profane intermingle. The painter shows conversational microsocieties of two or three—never more, for gossip is no longer gossip in groups larger than three. The artist shows us the unedited stories rising to the lips of the speakers, just as he himself, a Tuscan painter of the fourteenth century, is straining against custom to haul never-before-depicted events of everyday life into representability. The painter shows the scene of *anecdote*—Greek for

emphasis on Mary's subjection to the Mosaic law prescribing a sacrifice of pigeons in order to achieve Purification.

59. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Mcquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), sec. 35. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York, 1985), relates gossip to pastoral, Restoration comedy, the realist novel, and existentialist thought.

"unpublished"—where the unedited counternarratives to the priestly narrative come to the surface. An anecdote about Mary is the coming into audibility of the everyday, commonsensical, intuitive, and taken for granted. The anecdote, or scrap of gossip, is pragmatic, skeptical, and desublimating.

In the painting by Paolo di Giovanni Fei, the men at the lower right, impassive, surly figures, are the elders of the community; they mediate between the clergy and the outside world (fig. 9). There is a notable shortage of youthful, virile heroes in the stories about this family: it is all old priestly men, the hapless Joseph, and women and children. Within the logic of the painting, the beauty of the temple virgins in the loft multiplies the beauty of Mary herself (fig. 10). The virgins are a facade of beauty and purity that the priests erect in order to mask what really happens in the temple, namely, the reenactments and staged communications designed to sustain the fiction of an absolute authority located beyond experience. Painting and temple alike borrow the ready-made beauty of the virgins. The virgins become symbols of the overall beauty of the painting, whose desirability is what distinguishes a painting, presumably, from a plainspoken story.

The temple virgins in this painting are a bank of flowers bobbing on stems. Their lightness of being brings them into resemblance with the angels in Giotto's Ognissanti Dormition of the Virgin (Berlin), so "blithely" distracted. As with angels, and as with the children they in fact are, one cannot grasp the "mentality" of the temple virgins in terms of any stable distinction between attention and distraction. Perched as they are in their mezzanine inside the temple, yet removed, they have a perspective on the proceedings that the men below cannot share. They see it rotated, and from above. They may see better. Even the Florentine mural paintings had not shown us the view they have.

The Presentation of Mary by Paolo di Giovanni Fei was placed on an altar in the Duomo of Siena. The composition is symmetrical. Our sight line is perpendicular to the screen separating the nave of the temple from the chancel. Yet one might well worry that a sacred painting that reproduces envious seeing, multiplying within the scene targets of attention and motivations, can no longer support a ritual. Nor can we imagine such perspectival crossfire within older forms of sacred painting. Take, for example, the illuminations in the thirteenth-century prayer books owned by superelites especially in France and England. Alexa Sand's analysis of images of the book owners in attitudes of submission before the Virgin Mary is revealing. Sand argues that such pictures rendered the elite lay devout's desired image of how she herself looked to God. God's point of view is the only point of view that mattered in such recursive devotional involvements. The most adequate images of this scenario could not involve pictorial perspective. Such images, Sand argues, instead valorized
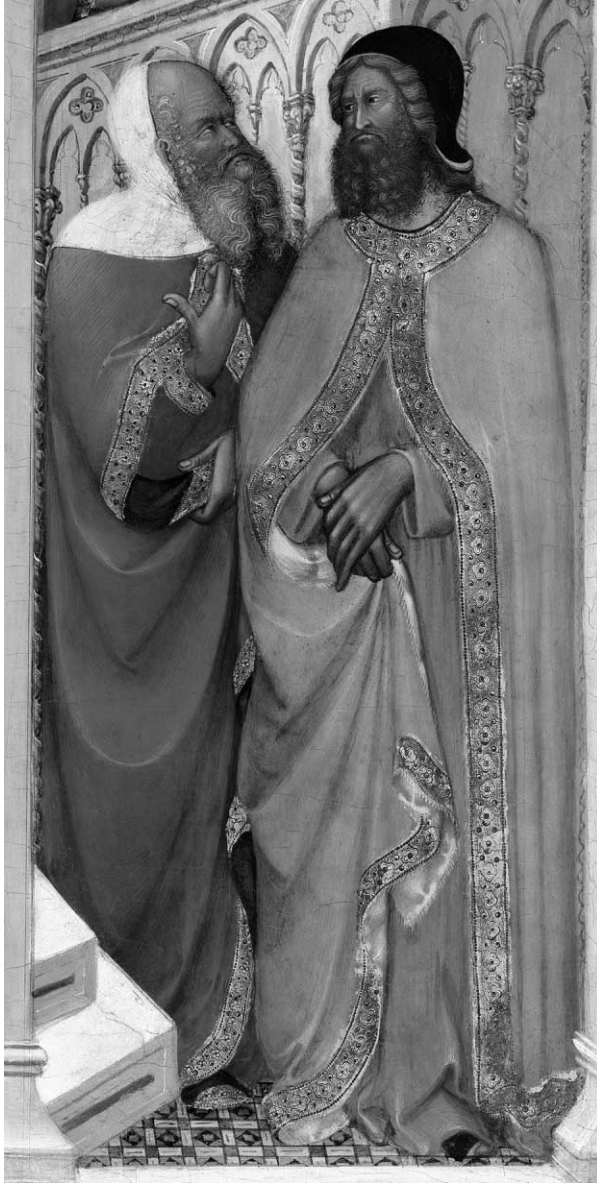
Figure 9. Paolo di Giovanni Fei, Presentation of Mary in the Temple, detail. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Figure 10. Paolo di Giovanni Fei, Presentation of Mary in the Temple, detail. Color version available as an online enhancement.

"the ultimate extinction of the singular limited point of view inherent in the mortal body." Perspective, by contrast, which according to Sand was developed in the following century mainly to suit the self-images of male patrons, was the stabilizing affirmation of the power of one gaze to govern a situation. Perspective fixed the subject at a point within a preexisting spatial matrix.[60]

An altarpiece is not supposed to disorient us; just the opposite. The Sienese painters rejected the rotated, "social" perspective. They squared the Florentine Presentation, made it "true," brought it into alignment with the altar and the chapel. They exploited the stabilizing, focusing effect of perspective. The specular ricocheting of gazes that perspective sets in motion is disciplined into the form of an infinite

60. Alexa Sand, *Vision, Devotion, and Self-Representation in Late Medieval Art* (New York, 2014), 281.

regress, whose inward pull seems inescapable. And that is just what a painting such as this is supposed to do, planted as it is on an altar, in a chapel, in a church, and depicting an altar, a chapel, and a temple: a near-perfect overlap of real and virtual settings.

Christianity cannot afford to invite every individual to judge things by her own lights, over and over again. Seeing, believing, and thinking must at times be delegated to the machineries of spectacle, ritual, and doctrine. A centered perspective seems complicit with this aim. The perspectival painting, symmetrical, is meant to cut off the circuitry of envy, immobilize the volleys of invidious seeing, and finally permit the witnesses to enter again into the desirable state of an *interpassive* ritual, or emotionality without emotion.[61] To participate in ritual is to be willing to let the ritual carry out the worship. The system of interlocking passivities locates faith everywhere and nowhere. The system does not acknowledge belief as a state of mind freely adopted by a subject. Under the regime of interpassivity, it is unthinkable for the subject to ever abandon belief or indeed ever make an up-or-down choice about it. Perspective tries to extend the interpassivity of ritual, for to see a picture in perspective is to delegate someone else to do your seeing for you.

So it would seem that the altarpiece by Paolo di Giovanni Fei, which stabilizes the relation between beholder and temple and distributes emotion across a field, is the very picture of interpassivity. Here the art of sacred painting has "settled." The painting's festive, repetitive, centripetal melodies reinforce one another. The picture is integrated despite its bright, distinct, and bounded colors. Paolo has created a precious and complete object, competing with the art of the goldsmith, the jeweler, and the enamelist. The formal perfection of the artwork neutralizes the bad energy of the enviers. The artwork offers itself as a surrogate, an image of plenitude that diverts the envious eye away from the holy personages and onto itself.

Once we recognize the internal perspectives implied by the depicted attentivenesses, however, the picture no longer appears so resolved. The painter has not described the ritualized event without psychic remainder. Paolo di Giovanni Fei is sometimes reckoned a late, derivative artist, an unoriginal epigone of the great Sienese painters of the first half of the century. But this picture is no etiolated, academic exercise. The overall framework is stable. Inside that frame, however, the composition is so finely tuned that every vibration, every slight content-driven departure from formal equilibrium is conspicuous. Strong forces justify the picture, but against that stable field appear folds and dents. Mary turns her head backward;

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61. On interpassivity, or the possibility of participating in beliefs even while attributing them to others, see Robert Pfaller, *Die Illusionen der anderen: Über das Lustprinzip in der Kultur* (Frankfurt, 2002).

the heads of the virgins bob back and forth; the brows of the older men furrow. The vibrations are like the tugs of a tether that ties the painting to something out-side itself—not to divine authority but to a stratum of personhood, anarchic and incalculable, which Francis of Assisi and his most fervent followers revealed but the devotional system was having difficulty absorbing. The vibrations suggest that in-vidious seeing, driven as it is by a hallucination of inimitable beauty and complete-ness, implicated as it is in the autogenesis of the subject, escapes not only ritual but culture itself.