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**MEDIEVAL MULTIVALENCE: SUBVERSION, VENERATION, AND SAINT
JOSEPH IN BARTOLO DI FREDI'S *ADORATION OF THE MAGI***
MULTIVALENCIA MEDIEVAL: SUBVERSIÓN Y VENERACIÓN EN LA FIGURA
DE SAN JOSÉ DE LA *ADORACIÓN DE LOS MAGOS* DE BARTOLO DI FREDI

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ABSTRACT

In prior scholarship on saint Joseph of Nazareth, 'low', 'profane' humor is cast as the antithesis to 'high' veneration and theology. But rather than negating the theological richness or complexity of many works, humor and satire often reinforced such meanings instead, and might be understood as much more than simple tools for teaching or appealing to an uneducated laity. Bartolo di Fredi's use of satire in his *Adoration of the Magi* (1385-88; Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena) reveals a more nuanced understanding of Joseph's late medieval imagery as potentially multivalent, complex, and highly engaging. Such works challenge prior distinctions made between profane and sacred, lay and clerical concerns, as well as interpretations of liturgical and devotional works as producing directed, singular statements with clear-cut messages on morality.

KEYWORDS: saint Joseph, humor, satire, multivalence, Bartolo di Fredi, Siena.

RESUMEN

En los estudios tradicionales dedicados a la figura de san José de Nazaret, el humor "bajo" y "profano" se presenta como la antítesis de la veneración y la teología más "elevadas". Sin embargo, en lugar de negar la riqueza teológica o la complejidad de muchas obras, el humor y la sátira a menudo reforzaron los significados doctrinales, y pudieron entenderse como ambiciosos recursos y no solo como simples herramientas para enseñar o apelar a los laicos incultos. El uso que hizo Bartolo di Fredi de la sátira en su *Adoración de los Magos* (1385-88; Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena) revela que durante la Baja Edad Media la iconografía de San José se concibió y formuló como potencialmente multivalente, compleja y altamente atractiva.

Tales obras del último gótico desafían las valoraciones antitéticas entre pretensiones profanas y sagradas, naturaleza laica y religiosa, pero también cuestionan las interpretaciones de obras litúrgicas y devocionales, como productoras de declaraciones dirigidas y singulares que contenían mensajes inequívocos sobre la moralidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: San José, humor, sátira, multivalencia, Bartolo di Fredi, Siena.

The predominant scholarship on saint Joseph of Nazareth's representation in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art offers two very different and conflicting interpretations with respect to humor. One strand acknowledges the frequent presence of humor in the saint's depictions, but interprets this presence as indicative of the saint's derision exclusively, concluding that such representations could not be symptomatic of his veneration. Often interpreted as a space-filling device, or an 'afterthought', the humor of Joseph's rusticity or avarice, for example, is thought to be solely derogatory, evidence that "...the fifteenth century Joseph was as yet very far from achieving sainthood."¹ The opposing camp has made the important case for the strength of Joseph's cult in Italy and in northern Europe as early as the fourteenth century, but in doing so, attempts to sanitize any problematically comical depictions of the saint.² In both cases, 'low', 'profane' humor is therefore perceived as the antithesis to 'high' veneration and theology.

But rather than negating the theological richness or complexity of many works, humor often reinforced such meanings instead. Although certainly not present in all late medieval depictions of Joseph, humor played a central role in many such scenes, and not solely as a tool for teaching or appealing to an uneducated lay public, currently the sole hypothesis for humor's presence in late medieval altarpieces.³ The aim of this essay is to encourage a more nuanced

¹ L. O. VASVARI, "Joseph on the Margin: The Mérode Tryptic and Medieval Spectacle," *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995), p. 168. Erwin Panofsky was the first to introduce this idea: E. PANOFSKY, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, Cambridge, 1953, vol. 1, p. 164. See also J. HUIZINGA, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. R. J. PAYTON and U. MAMMITSCH, 1921, Chicago, 1996, p. 177, pp. 194-96; L. RÉAU, "Joseph," *Iconographie des saints*, vol. 3, pt. 2 of *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, Paris, 1958, pp. 752-55; C. CUTTLER, *Northern Painting from Pucelle to Bruegel: Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Centuries*, New York, 1968, p. 55; M. B. FOSTER, "The Iconography of St. Joseph in Netherlandish Art, 1400-1550," PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1978, p. 249; J. SNYDER, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, and the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*, 1985, 2nd ed., L. SILVER and H. LUTTIKHUIZEN (eds.), Upper Saddle River, N.J., p. 73; T. RODRIGUES (ed.), *Butler's Lives of the Saints: New Full Edition*, vol. 3., Collegeville, M.N., 1993), pp. 185-186; R. MELLINKOFF, *Outcasts: Signs of Others in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, Berkeley, I (1994), p. 82, p. 226.

² In much of the prior work on the saint's depictions in art, Joseph is cleansed of his humor, or the humor is simply unseen, while other arguments more consciously negate its presence with appeals to (convincing) arguments rooted in earlier medieval theological discourse. But a work's theological significance does not preclude the presence and function of humor. S. SCHWARTZ, "St. Joseph in Meister Bertram's Petri-Altar," *Gesta* 24-2 (1985), pp. 147-56; C. C. WILSON, *St. Joseph in Italian Renaissance Society and Art: New Directions and Interpretations*, Philadelphia, 2001, p. 95.

³ Joseph's humor has more recently been seen as a function of the "popular-oral consciousness of lay religiosity" and of a need to educate a lay populace unfamiliar with Christian beliefs. Scholars like Carol Purtle remind us, however, that the laity was generally far more familiar with Christian symbolism in art than today's viewers. Furthermore, humor often amplified theological symbolism in works produced for the most educated, upper echelons of society.

understanding of late medieval humor and satire, and of Joseph's late medieval imagery as potentially multivalent, complex, and highly engaging. Reevaluating the nature and functions of humor allows us to challenge prior distinctions made between profane and sacred, lay and clerical concerns, as well as interpretations of liturgical and devotional works as producing directed, singular statements with clear-cut messages on morality.

What saint Joseph reveals for us is a late medieval movement of functional wit, satire, humor, and play from the margins to the center of sacred scenes, contemporaneous with the rise of the saint's cult in western Europe beginning in the early thirteenth century, with the appearance of his most holy relic, the 'Hosen' (Joseph's stockings or pants, woven into Christ's swaddling clothes), at Aachen Cathedral, as well as his girdle at Avignon.⁴ As I have argued elsewhere, rather than detracting from the saint's veneration, visual jokes on Joseph's cuckoldry by God the Father and his bumbling nature as diaper-washer and porridge-cooker functioned as vehicles for highlighting his most important virtues—his chastity, old age, and care for the Son of God despite his incomplete understanding of the miraculous birth—reinforcing the most important aspects of his sainthood that the viewer would have known to be truths. Laughing at the saint in this sense was a form of veneration, upholding central tenets of the Christian faith with respect to Joseph's role in the salvation of mankind.⁵

But in Bartolo di Fredi's Sieneese Adoration of the Magi of c. 1385-88 (Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena; Figs. 1 and 2), there is no clearly 'funny' or 'sober' message produced by Joseph's depiction, although the saint was certainly a role model at that time. Joseph is dignified by his gilded halo, his scale, and his position as protector of his family from the fray. Yet with furrowed brow he turns away from the adoring onlookers, clutching the Magus's precious golden gift as far away from them as possible, while casting a wary eye toward the unruly horses and servant of the holy kings. Somewhat redolent of worldly greed, yet reverently haloed, Bartolo presents a saintly model that defies a single interpretation, or a single moral message.

Relatively little is known about the cult of Joseph in trecento Siena, except that the Servite Fra Nicolo Pieri of Siena (Fra Niccolò di Pietro Barlettaio) preached sermons in the saint's honor early in that century. As the *Ordo Servorum Mariae* (Protectors of Mary), the Servites

As Lilian Randall and Michael Camille have shown, the satirical marginalia of Books of Hours and Psalters, for example, often served an important role in amplifying the sacred events depicted center stage. The audiences of such satirical commentaries in the margins, as in the Capetian Jeanne d'Evreux's lavish c. 1324-28 *Book of Hours*, were probably not enjoying such motifs for educational purposes. For the lay education theory with respect to late medieval altarpieces, see F. ALBERTI, "'Divine Cuckolds': Joseph and Vulcan in Renaissance Art and Literature," in S. F. MATTHEWS-GRIECO (ed.), *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th-17th century)*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2014, p. 161. For a contextualized understanding of lay familiarity with sacred symbolism and events, see C. J. PURTLE, *The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck*, Princeton, 1982, p. xv. See also L. M. C. RANDALL, "Games and the Passion in Pucelle's Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux," *Speculum* 47, no. 2 (Apr., 1972), pp. 246-257; M. CAMILLE, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, London, 1992. Joseph's humor and sacrality are sometimes dually acknowledged, but are seen to be incoherent. See P. SHEINGORN, "Constructing the Patriarchal Parent: Fragments of the Biography of Joseph the Carpenter," in R. VOADEN and D. WOLFTHAL (eds.), *Framing the Family: Narrative and Representation in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, Tempe, A.Z., 2005, p. 171.

⁴ J. F. CHORPENNING, O.S.F.S., *Sermon Texts on Saint Joseph by Francis de Sales*, Toronto, 2000, p. 33.

⁵ A. L. WILLIAMS, "Satirizing the Sacred: Humor in St. Joseph's Veneration and Early Modern Art", *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 10-1 (Winter, 2018).



Fig. 1. Bartolo di Fredi, Adoration of the Magi, panel from an altarpiece, 1385-88, tempera on panel, 195 x 163 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena (photo: Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Museale della Toscana, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, with permission)

had adopted a feast of saint Joseph in 1324, with the Franciscans to follow in 1399.⁶ Joseph's prominence in the frescoes of Siena Cathedral's 'cripta'⁷—indeed, the reverence that the painters accorded to the saint in that cycle—suggests that the saint may have risen to importance as early as 1270 in that city, when the crypt was constructed, probably as a kind of lower chapel. This fact, as Herbert Kessler points out, defies predominant understandings of the saint's cult since Erwin Panofsky, who interpreted Melchior Broederlam's rustic, canteen-swigging Joseph in an altarpiece for the Chartreuse de Champmol (1393-99; Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts) as evidence of the saint's lack of stature in late medieval devotion.⁷ Yet the fact that this Joseph

⁶ A. BATTISTON, C.S.J., "Deux sermons du fr. Nicolo Pieri de Sienne sur saint Joseph," *Cahiers de Joséphologie*, 7-1 (1959), pp. 79-102; C. WILSON, *St. Joseph in Italian Renaissance Society and Art: New Directions and Interpretations*, Philadelphia, 2001, pp. 6-7.

⁷ H. KESSLER, "Joseph in Siena," in J. F. CHORPENNING, O.S.F.S. (ed.), *St. Joseph of Nazareth Through the Centuries*, Philadelphia, 2011, pp. 66-73; PANOFSKY, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. 1, p. 164.



Fig. 2. Bartolo di Fredi, detail, Adoration of the Magi, panel from an altarpiece, 1385-88, tempera on panel, 195 x 163 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena (photo: Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Museale della Toscana, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, with permission)

presents himself differently than a ridiculous peasant does not necessarily mean that other depicted Josephs marked by derision or ‘mild fun’ negate their functions as saintly mediators, particularly once we have reconsidered the Panofskian understanding of humor as solely deprecatory.

In the early 1300s, while Fra Nicolo preached sermons on Joseph in Siena, the building of the cathedral’s new baptistery seems to have ended public access to the murals in the ‘cripta’. But in the second half of the fourteenth century, the east end of the cathedral was remodeled extensively, altarpieces of the four patron saints were relocated there, and new altarpieces were commissioned to replace them in the aisles and transepts. Gaudenz Freuler and Diana Norman believe that of the two known altarpieces commissioned for this function between the 1380s and 90s, Bartolo di Fredi’s Adoration of the Magi was one. This is supported by the work’s dating, based on style, and by the fact that the lower half of the composition “...has been arranged in such a way as to give a strong impetus to read the narrative from left to right, therefore towards the east end of the cathedral where the high altar lay.”⁸ Joseph’s prominent position in this work would have echoed that of the saint in the Cathedral’s closed-off ‘cripta’. Yet others believe that the altarpiece was commissioned for the church of San Domenico, a possibility that, for reasons discussed below, seems equally probable. In the exhibition

⁸ D. NORMAN, *Painting in Late Medieval and Renaissance Siena (1260-1555)*, New Haven, 2003, p. 144; G. FREULER, *Bartolo di Fredi Cini: Ein Beitrag zur sienesischen Malerei des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Disentis, 1994, pp. 284-96, pp. 476-78.

catalogue marking the altarpiece's reconstruction at the University of Virginia Art Museum, organized by Francesca Fiorani and Bruce Boucher (and based on Freuler's reconstruction), the work is determined to have been painted for the Dominican church's Altar of the Three Kings. Dating the altarpiece between 1375 and 1385, Wolfgang Loseries identifies its patron as Angelina Cinughi, but cites two other documents, one dating the work to 1374 and another dating its commission to 1348, as part of the will of Bilia di Ghetto.⁹ If the work was commissioned in 1348, before the Black Death, and if the initial desired artist was chosen at that point, that artist could not have been Bartolo, since he was active from the 1360s through the first decade of the fifteenth century. Regardless of the work's date, an excess of Dominican saints



Fig. 3. Pupil of Meister Francke, Adoration of the Magi, Preetz Altarpiece, c. 1435, Preetz Abbey, Schleswig-Holstein, CC-BY-SA, Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen (photo: author)

in the predella bolsters the argument for a Dominican context, as does the fact that Bartolo and his son served as 'official painters' of the Dominicans of Montalcino, for whom Bartolo executed an Adoration of the Shepherds (1374; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) with another prominent Joseph.¹⁰

Signifiers of 'otherness' certainly appear to have infiltrated Joseph's sacred iconography both north and south of the Alps, particularly in works depicting the saint as family 'treasurer', packing away the Magi's treasures into the family's chest (Fig. 3), scrutinizing the gold coins in his hands (Fig. 4), or ogling the precious gifts with a hint of worldly desire, all while the other protagonists admire the Christ child. Close attention to Giotto's Adoration of the Magi in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 5) reveals that Joseph's line of sight extends not toward the Christ child, nor to Melchior, from whom he just received the precious

⁹ W. LOSERIES, "Altarpieces of the Adoration of the Magi and the Shepherds by Bartolo di Fredi: New Documentation and New Evidence," in *Bartolo di Fredi, The Adoration of the Magi: A Masterpiece Reconstructed*, Charlottesville, 2012, pp. 41-63; F. FIORANI, "Bartolo di Fredi's View of Siena as the New Jerusalem," in *Bartolo di Fredi, The Adoration of the Magi: A Masterpiece Reconstructed*, Charlottesville, 2012, pp. 32-35; FREULER, *Bartolo di Fredi Cini*, pp. 284-96 and 476-78.

¹⁰ J. B. STEINHOFF, *Sienese Painting After the Black Death: Artistic Pluralism, Politics, and the New Art Market*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 62-63; G. FREULER, "Andrea di Bartolo, Fra Tommaso d'Antonio Caffarini, and Sienese Dominicans in Venice," *Art BULLETIN*, 69-4 (1987), p. 578.



Fig. 4. Gherardo Starnina, Adoration of the Magi, first quarter of the 15th century, Florence, tempera on wood, 30.5 x 57.5 cm, Inv. 149, Escallier Bequest, 1857, Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai (photo: author)



Fig. 5. Giotto di Bondone, Adoration of the Magi, c. 1320, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

gift of myrrh, but to the gold still held by Caspar. Giotto indeed is known for his witty, harassed Josephs in the Paduan Scrovegni Chapel's Marriage of the Virgin and Flight into Egypt.¹¹ Images like the Adoration scene from the Blankenberch Retable of c. 1430/40 (Fig. 6), like the treasure chest imagery, characterize the saint as keeper of the treasure and perplexed head of the household. In such works, Joseph is frequently the smallest adult present and barred from the rest of the Adoration figures by some sort of barrier. He receives the Magus's precious gift, holds the treasure, or sometimes glances toward it with a longing look of desire or incredulity.

The wide geographical spread of similar motifs may be explained in part by legends, plays, and pilgrimage.¹² The humor of Joseph's involvement with worldly affairs stems from the popularity of his most important relic, which is largely ignored in Joseph studies, although it was reportedly visited frequently by pilgrims after its appearance at Aachen Cathedral. Various mystical writings, Christmas hymns, and fourteenth- through sixteenth-century chronicles mention the holy *Hosen* themselves and their exhibition at Aachen, and they appear also on several pilgrim flasks and medallions. Beginning in 1349, the four great holy relics of Aachen—the swaddling clothes/stockings of Joseph, the tunic Mary wore when Christ was born, the loincloth of Christ, and the shroud of John the Baptist—were all displayed in the cathedral during the 'great pilgrimage,' which took place every seven years.¹³

¹¹ A. LADIS, "The Legend of Giotto's Wit and the Arena Chapel," *Art Bulletin*, 68-4 (Dec. 1986), pp. 581-596.

¹² Siena particularly was connected to the north on the trade and pilgrimage routes to Rome. See D. J. BIRCH, *Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages: Continuity and Change*, Woodbridge, 1998, pp. 43-49.

¹³ Josef de Coo's 1965 article on Joseph's *Hosen* in painting, pilgrim medallions, and literature exposes the relic's significance for late medieval pilgrims and the devout of western Europe. J. DE COO, "In Josephs *Hosen* Jhesus ghewonden wert: Ein Weihnachtsmotiv in Literatur und Kunst," *Aachener Kunstblätter*, 30 (1965), pp. 144-84.

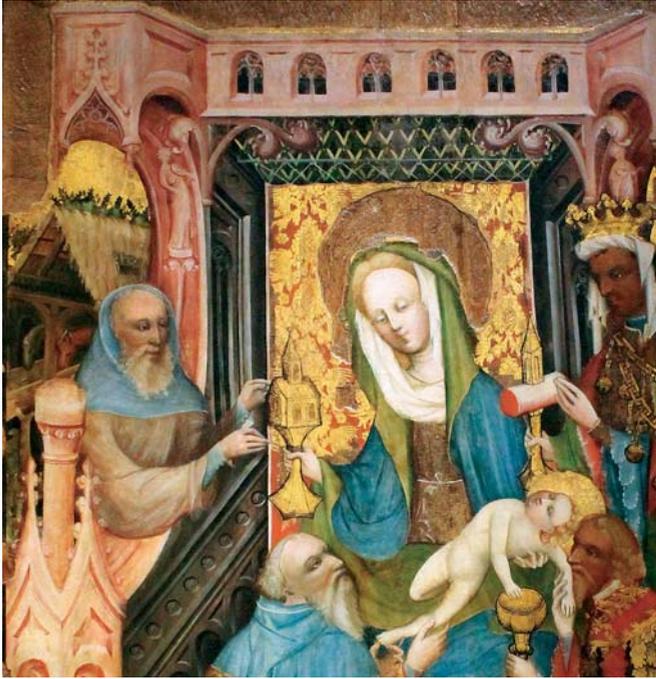


Fig. 6. Circle of the Master of the Fröndenberger Marienretabels (after Conrad von Soest), detail, Adoration of the Magi, Blankenberch Retable, c. 1430/40, oil on wood, Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, loan from the Westfälisches Kunstverein (photo: author)

Because Joseph's relic was believed to have been sewn from his stockings, it became the epicenter of a large oral and visual tradition that celebrated the saint's care for the child in the face of destitution, while often poking fun at the man for losing his pants. In addition to drawing hordes of pilgrims to Aachen's cathedral, the story of Joseph relinquishing his clothes inspired raucous scenes in cradle plays that share the central motif of Joseph rocking the cradle and singing to the baby, peppered with the saint's hilariously inadequate attempts at caring for his household. Although only four cradle plays survive, the temporal and geographical range of these examples' origins—from Hessen to Bolzano—suggests that a tradition of Josephine humor dating as early as the thirteenth century was not unique to the north.¹⁴ Indeed, the popularity of such Nativity plays throughout Western Europe, coupled with the movements of pilgrims on the trade routes between Rome and the north, provides an important context for the appearance of humorous depictions of Joseph.¹⁵ But work remains to be done on the

¹⁴ L. BERTHOLD, "Die Kindelwiegenspiele," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 56 (1932), p. 209. The existing manuscripts classified as *Kindelwiegenspiele* are the *Ludus in cunabulis Christi* of the *Erlauer Spiele* from Kärnten (Gmünd, early 15th century), the *Hessische Weihnachtsspiel*, of Friedberg, dated between 1450 and 1460, and the *Sterzinger Weihnachtsspiel* of 1511 (Bolzano, South Tyrol), written by Vigil Raber. Eckehard Simon added the *schwäbische Weihnachtsspiel* of Constance to Berthold's category. See E. SIMON, "Das schwäbische Weihnachtsspiel: Ein neu entdecktes Weihnachtsspiel aus der Zeit 1417-1431," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 94 (1975), p. 45.

¹⁵ LADIS, "The Legend of Giotto's Wit and the Arena Chapel," pp. 581-596.

use of humor in devotional and liturgical art of trecento Italy. Studies on Joseph's cult in Italy have rightfully focused on reclaiming a history of early devotion to the saint, but in doing so, they, like Panofsky, assume that humor was antithetical to the saint's devotion.¹⁶ Any possible hints of derision or humor are therefore ignored or sanitized, as they are perceived to be antithetical to the cause. As a result, many risible Josephs in Italian liturgical and devotional art remain unstudied and unpublished, probably in part due to their perceived deviation from more 'appropriate' venerable images.

Early in the fifteenth century, the theologian and Chancellor of the University of Paris Jean Gerson bemoaned the prevalence of caricatures of saint Joseph in art, and insisted in his *Josephina* (1414-18) on the saint's youth and beauty; this itself makes modern scholarly attempts to cleanse Joseph of his humor unfortunate.¹⁷ Comparisons to such theological statements and devotional manuals illuminate 'deviant' Josephs. For example, in the widely popular *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (c. 1300), Mary insists on giving away the Magi's precious gifts to the poor, while in his fifteenth-century *Summa Moralis* (printed 1477), the Florentine Antoninus places particular emphasis on Joseph's poverty, arguing that Joseph himself gave the Magi's gifts away.¹⁸ But Joseph's fascination with the Magi's gold in works like those of Bartolo, Giotto, or Gherardo Starnina are more redolent of greed than of charity. If such images were not intended to poke fun at Joseph's preoccupation with worldly wealth, then the saint's attentions would probably be directed elsewhere.

It is certainly true, as Sheila Schwartz argued, that in accordance with the ninth-century theologians Christian of Stavelot and Paschasius Radbertus, the offering of gold to the infant Jesus in scenes of the Adoration of the Magi could be interpreted as a reminder of the child's royal lineage. As the keeper of this gold in many Adoration scenes, Joseph is therefore the guardian of the Davidic line (and ultimately Jesus), and the devoted helpmate of Mary.¹⁹ But in emphasizing the saint's role as financial manager of his family's wealth, popular preachers like Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444), who was inspired by early trecento Siennese sermons on Joseph, reveal a saint less emblematic of idealized poverty. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Tuscany, the circulation of economic ideas via sermons, humanist writers, and merchants resulted in a new ideal of masculinity rooted in monetary exchange; these give us insight into some of the anxieties generated by man's shifting relationship to money, rooted in the contradiction between the importance of acquiring wealth and continuing Christian ideals of charity and poverty.²⁰ Inspired by the only other theologian who had written a treatise on scholastic

¹⁶ WILSON, *St. Joseph*, p. 66.

¹⁷ JEAN GERSON, *Considérations sur Saint Joseph*, III, 842-68; JEAN GERSON, *Josephina*, IV, 753; JEAN GERSON, *Sermo de natalitate beatae Mariae Virginis*, III, 1351, in *Opera omnia*, L. E. du Pin (ed.), 2nd ed., 5 vols., Hagae Comitibus, 1728.

¹⁸ I. RAGUSA, R. B. GREEN (trans. and ed.), *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century*, Princeton, 1961; K. CHRISTIANSEN, L. B. KANTER, C. B. STREHLKE, *Painting in Renaissance Siena: 1420-1500*, New York, 1988, p. 209.

¹⁹ G. MERCIER, "Saint Joseph dans les commentaires bibliques et les homéliaires du IX^e siècle," *Cahiers de Joséphologie*, 19 (1971), pp. 232-53; S. SCHWARTZ, "St. Joseph in Meister Bertram's Petri-Altar," *Gesta*, 24-2 (1985), pp. 147-56.

²⁰ J. VITULLO, D. WOLFFHAL, "Negotiating Masculinity in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in J. VITULLO and D. WOLFFHAL (eds.), *Money, Morality, and Culture in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Burlington, 2010, pp. 155-96. For analyses of the monetary economy's effects on Christian ethics and morality, see J. LE GOFF, *Your Money or Your Life: Economy and Religion in the Middle Ages*, New York, 1988; J. KAYE, *Economy and Nature in the*



Fig. 7. Personification of the Vice of Avarice, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Amiens, west façade, central portal, 1220-1236

economics, another Franciscan, Peter John Olivi (1248-1298), Bernardino pioneered theological discussions of the value of the entrepreneur, the merchant, trade, and private property in popular sermons. In the nascent capitalist economy of Siena itself, mercantilism reigned supreme; one's economic condition, above all, determined social and political status, and for Bernardino, Joseph became an ideal model for the new nuclear paterfamilias, as loyal father, provider, and treasurer.²¹

But those who saw or owned images that depicted Joseph as preoccupied with material goods were familiar as well with an extensive visual history that strongly associated worldly wealth with moral depravity, and attention to goods as a source of corruption.²² In fact, the only other character so closely tied with many of Joseph's depictions as 'treasurer' is Avarice, a personification closely linked with the infamous Judas Iscariot and medieval Christian conceptions of the 'miserly Jew', a caricature often shown holding a moneybag or in proximity to chests of coins.²³ On the entrance portals of Gothic cathedrals, the vice of Avarice is shown rather ubiquitously packing her treasure away, as at Chartres and Amiens (Fig. 7).²⁴ It is no wonder that

Fourteenth Century: Money, Market Exchange, and the Emergence of Scientific Thought, Cambridge, 2000; N. B.-A. DEBBY, *Renaissance Florence in the Rhetoric of Two Popular Preachers: Giovanni Dominici (1356-1419) and Bernardino da Siena (1380-1444)*, Turnhout, 2001, pp. 157-95; W. M. BOWSKY, *Finance of the Commune of Siena 1287-1355*, Oxford, 1970; Id., "The Medieval Commune and Internal Violence: Police Power and Public Safety in Siena 1287-1355," *American Historical Review* LXXIII (1967), pp. 1-17; D. HERLIHY, C. KLAPISCH-ZÜBER, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427*, New Haven, 1985, pp. 124-25.

²¹ Influenced by the early trecento sermons of Fra Nicolo Pieri, Bernardino laid out this position in a Christmas Eve sermon in Siena. BERNARDINO DA SIENA, *Le prediche volgari – Quaresimale Fiorentino del 1424*, C. CANNAROZZI (ed.), 2 vols., Pistoia, 1934. For the Siennese sermon, see A. BATTISTON, C.S.J., "Le Patronage de Saint Joseph en Italie," *Actes du Congrès d'études tenu à l'Oratoire Saint-Joseph, Montréal, 1^{er} 9 août 1995* (Montreal, 1956), p. 51. Like Bernardino, Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce also preached a Christmas Eve sermon on Saint Joseph in Padua. See also D. HERLIHY, "The Making of the Medieval Family: Symmetry, Structure, and Sentiment," *Journal of Family History*, 8-2 (Summer, 1983), pp. 116-30. For the growth of the urban economy in Tuscany, see D. R. LESNICK, *Preaching in Medieval Florence: The Social World of Franciscan and Dominican Spirituality*, Athens, G.A., 1989, pp. 1-34.

²² R. NEWHAUSER, *The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature*, Cambridge, 2000. See also R. NEWHAUSER (ed.), *The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals*, Leiden, 2007; R. G. NEWHAUSER, S. J. RIDYARD (eds.), *Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, York, 2012; J. VITULLO, D. WOLFFHAL (eds.), *Money, Morality, and Culture in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Burlington, 2010.

²³ B. WIEDL, "Laughing at the Beast: The *Judensau*: Anti-Jewish Propaganda and Humor from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period," in A. GLASSEN (ed.), *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequences*, Berlin, 2010, p. 325. See also A. DERBES, M. SANDONA, *The Usurer's Heart: Giotto, Enrico Scrovegni, and the Arena Chapel in Padua*, University Park, P.A., 2008, pp. 14-48.

²⁴ The implications of the treasure chest continued to resonate in later print culture, as in Hans Holbein's *The Rich Man* from his *Dance of Death*. D. KUNZLE, *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825*, Berkeley, 1973.



Fig. 8. Meister Francke,
Adoration of the Magi, Saint
Thomas (Englandfahrer)
Altarpiece, 1424, tempera
on oak, 99 x 89.3 cm,
Kunsthalle, Hamburg
(photo: author)

Erwin Panofsky describes Joseph in the Adoration scene of Meister Francke's Saint Thomas Altarpiece of 1424 (Fig. 8) as "an amiable caricature of the Philistine's thrift and caution [... he] confiscates the precious gifts for which, he thinks, the Infant Jesus would have little use and which would be safer in the family's traveling chest."²⁵ Ruth Mellinkoff supports this view, adding, "The deprecation is, I suggest, intensified because of Joseph's placement on the stool, in a dorsal position—scarcely an image to be venerated."²⁶ Although the dorsal position in art does not always equate with derision, Joseph's small size and marginalization with respect to other depicted figures (Fig. 6) often do. Medieval Christian images of wealth and preoccupation with worldly goods were intrinsically tied to contemporary anti-Semitism, and especially to perceived evils associated with greed and lending money at interest. As early as the twelfth century, Joseph was clearly emphasized as Jewish in art, often through his headwear.²⁷ This was tied to his 'unenlightened' state, as one whom, at Christ's birth, does not immediately recognize the child as Savior. But he was also venerated as the first convert to the new, Christian

²⁵ PANOFSKY, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. 1, p. 70.

²⁶ MELLINKOFF, *Outcasts*, vol. 1, p. 227.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 62.

religion during the Nativity. The saint's Jewishness was important as a typological statement of his ties to the Old Law, biblically fulfilled by the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the New Law.²⁸

Avarice's affinity with Joseph's image as keeper of the goods is undeniable, yet it should not be assumed that because of this, the saint was intended to be portrayed in a solely derogatory fashion, as 'scarcely an image to be venerated.' But perhaps this imagery was also not meant to be completely praiseworthy in its strong connotations of worldliness. Rather, like the cooking or diaper-washer Joseph, as in Hieronymous Bosch's *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1494; Madrid, Museo del Prado), Bartolo's materialistic, 'burgher' Joseph could have poked fun at the saint's well-known affinity for the earthly cares of the Holy Family, the same facet of his character that inspired comedic scenes of faulty cooking attempts in contemporary cradle plays.

Veneration and subversion, sacred and profane, even the satire of avarice and the celebration of fiscal responsibility, were perhaps not so antithetical in late fourteenth-century Siena. Satire, here, might differ from its conventional definitions as a phenomenon intended to elicit a singular, directed response.²⁹ While upholding new ideals of fiscal responsibility tied to the rise of the urban, nuclear family, Bartolo's 'treasurer' Joseph seems to simultaneously subvert these ideals for their slippage into avarice, a problem of particular social relevance to pre-Reformation church practices based on the exchange of money.³⁰ Joseph's caricature as the avaricious embodiment of the Old Law might have been extended as well, in the minds of some contemporaries, to a satire of avaricious ecclesiastical elites. Indeed, a major focus of popular preaching was the overt greed of clergy-members. Joseph was often a figure of identification for priests as the leaders of their congregations, and according to Bernard of Clairvaux, Jean Gerson, Fra Niccolo, and Bernardino, Joseph's status as the head of his family rendered him analogous to the head of the Church, the pope himself.³¹

Reconciling the production of reverent and subversive messages at once is difficult, as is the reconciliation of these messages' relevance to both lay and clerical audiences. To explain lay and clerical reception of the procession of monstrous creatures over the door of Saint-Pierre at Aulnay-de-Saintonge, Michael Camille employed the concept of 'ambivalence', writing that "while ambiguous things cannot be defined in terms of any specific category, things that are ambivalent belong to more than one domain at a time."³² The marginal imagery in monastic foundations and cathedrals therefore existed in two interpretive spaces. For the monks at Aul-

²⁸ This dual significance continues to be celebrated in the seventeenth century as well; see S. PERLOVE, L. SILVER, *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age*, University Park, P.A., 2009, pp. 173-78.

²⁹ E. M. DUVAL, "Rabelais and French Renaissance Satire," in R. QUINTERO (ed.), *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, Oxford, 2007, p. 72.

³⁰ F. GOLDIN, *German and Italian Lyrics of the Middle Ages: An Anthology and a History*, Garden City, 1973, p. 107; L. KENDRICK, "Medieval Satire," in R. QUINTERO (ed.), *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, Oxford, 2007, p. 62. Late medieval critiques of greed in art and literature found ready audiences in both the laity and the clergy. When satirists began using the vernacular to denigrate papal policy, the audience became much wider than the usual elite audience familiar with good Latin.

³¹ SCHWARTZ, "St. Joseph in Meister Bertram's Petri-Altar," pp. 147-56; B. P. MCGUIRE, "Becoming a Father and a Husband: St. Joseph in Bernard of Clairvaux and Jean Gerson," in J. F. CHORPENNING, O.S.F.S. (ed.), *St. Joseph of Nazareth Through the Centuries*, Philadelphia, 2011, pp. 49-61.

³² CAMILLE, *Image on the Edge*, p. 67.

nay, the violent procession over the south door could have signified the vulgar, greedy groups of illiterate layfolk traveling on pilgrimage. But for the laity, the same images, particularly the ram-Bishop and harp-playing ass, critiqued clerical greed and illiteracy.³³

Yet this dichotomy of messages, for laity and clergy separately, overlooks the many possible crossings of meaning and interpretation elicited by a lay and clerical audience with many similar concerns. The term ‘popular culture’ is often employed to discuss a lower, lay culture rebelling against the elites of clerical society, but especially in the fourteenth century, it is perhaps best used to describe the culture of the many who do not belong to the highest political or religious leadership.³⁴ A critique of greed within the church, even a satirical, miserly Joseph on an altarpiece, would have been just as poignant for a lesser cleric. Throughout the Middle Ages, both laity and clergy criticized the ecclesiastical elite for exchanging penance for money and for selling divine forgiveness and justice—the unsellable, “any decision that was God’s to make.”³⁵ The development of a commercial economy based on the exchange of money rather than traditional loyalty was a concern particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for clerics, and the clergy’s concomitant sins became fodder for satires of papal and clerical avarice that continued through the Renaissance.³⁶ Witty collections of Latin verses, called cento, written in the syntax of Biblical verse, portray a pope who expounds his cardinals on the doctrine of avarice. Such Latin texts were originally produced and consumed by the clergy for the clergy, since few laymen could read them at the time—a tradition that expands the agency of Aulnay’s images across occupational divisions.³⁷

Bartolo’s altarpiece, as well as other works that portray Joseph in a manner reminiscent of contemporary caricatures of miserly behavior, spoke not to one audience alone, and probably not as an ambivalent work either, providing distinct messages to lay and clerical audiences as separate entities, conflicting and never interchangeable. The complexities of its imagery, satirizing the very saint that it upholds as the caretaker of Christ and Mary, suggest that it could have functioned on a much more multivalent level, offering the possibility of multiple, overlapping meanings for laity and clergy alike, speaking to lay fathers and spiritual fathers at once. Rather than attributing an altarpiece’s satirical, miserly Joseph to lay concerns exclusively—as is often the case in scholarship on religious humor—it is important to note that this image would have been just as poignant for a lesser cleric as for a lay viewer.

The use of satire in an altarpiece might be attributed to a number of reasons, but Bartolo’s Sienese example is enlivened particularly by late medieval rhetorical theory. Erich Au-

³³ Ibidem, p. 70.

³⁴ For this definition, see G. JARITZ, “Bildquellen zur mittelalterlichen Volksfrömmigkeit,” in P. DINZELBACHER and D. R. BAUER (eds.), *Volksreligion im hohen und späten Mittelalter*, Paderborn, 1990, p. 206; N. SCHINDLER, “Spuren in die Geschichte der ‘anderen’ Zivilisation. Probleme und Perspektiven einer historischen Volkskulturforchung,” in R. VAN DÜLMEN and N. SCHINDLER (eds.), *Volkskultur. Zur Wiederentdeckung des vergessenen Alltags (16.-20. Jahrhundert)*, Frankfurt am Main, 1984, pp. 23-24, 53 and 74-77; P. BURKE, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, New York, 1978, p. XI.

³⁵ KENDRICK, “Medieval Satire,” p. 55.

³⁶ J. A. YUNCK, *The Lineage of Lady Meed: The Development of Mediaeval Venality Satire*, Notre Dame, 1963, pp. 112-14.

³⁷ Greedy clerics were frequently described as predatory beasts, like the wolf, or mocked for their gluttony and guzzling of wine. See KENDRICK, “Medieval Satire,” pp. 56-58.

erbach called our attention to the ironic character of the Augustinian *sermo humilis*, a genre that continued through the Middle Ages, with the classical education of the Church Fathers forming the foundation for clerical and monastic education. The adaptation of classical rhetorical theory to Christian use did not produce a new theory, but rather an intermingling of previously distinct subject matters and styles. Cicero's threefold classification of style appropriate to subject matter, from 'low' to 'lofty', was repurposed to fit a new Christian function. In ancient rhetorical theory, *humilis* determined the low style, with its connotations of inferiority. But in Christian literature and thought, it took an important turn that vanquished its pejorative meaning. The humility of Jesus's Incarnation, and of a life lived among the poor, "derives its full force from the contrast with Christ's divine nature: man and God, lowly and sublime."³⁸ Augustine's sermons contrasted Christ's *humilitas* with the *superbia* of the Platonists' hatred for the body. He described the apostles as lowborn, illiterate, ignorant, and of the lowest condition. The Bible itself he described as a *sermo humilis*, characterized by a 'lowly' style simultaneously possessive of profound sublimity. *Humilitas* appeared through vulgarisms and realism in Augustine and Jerome as well; both authors used satirical passages in their sermons, as did the preachers of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Tuscany. These Auerbach considers hallmarks of the Christian *sermo humilis*, because they appear in situations concerning 'serious or profound matters' and are transformed by them. Satire and realism were joined to the sermon's desire to make human contact and to express intimate human bonds.³⁹ Of course, humor could also serve as a useful tool for provoking attentiveness and engagement.⁴⁰

Thus, *humilitas* provides an intriguing context for explaining the function of humor in a sacred scene like Bartolo's Adoration of the Magi. The realism or 'lowliness' of humor, the irony of using satire to present 'serious or profound matters' like the Nativity of Christ—or in a Christian adaptation of rhetorical theory, the 'low' style—was ultimately appropriate to the image's sacred function. The sublimity of a sermon in paint, for example, derived not from a desire for an elevated form, but rather for an elevated subject—and a subject like the Nativity or Adoration of Christ, in adopting humor, celebrated its humility most overtly. As a result, the biblical scene could connect on an unprecedentedly accessible level, while simultaneously containing profound messages of Christian salvation history. The inelegance of a Christian sermon by comparison with ancient rhetoric, marked by baseness, colloquialisms, humor, and satire, did not preclude the hidden meaning and sublime subject from shining forth. The same might be said for the Christian image: the *humilitas* of humor and satire in sacred art served the purpose not only of highlighting the sublimity of the Christian message through the use of irony. It also spoke in uniquely Christian terms, deriving from a rhetorical tradition rooted in classical antiquity but unique to Christian history.

An image's *humilitas* could celebrate the ironic sublimity of the Christian message and the birth of Christ—born human and poor as the Son of God—but it also functioned as a sort

³⁸ E. AUERBACH, *The Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, R. MANHEIM (trans.), Princeton, 1965, p. 41.

³⁹ AUERBACH, *Literary Language and its Public*, pp. 43-57.

⁴⁰ J. J. MURPHY, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance*, Berkeley, 1981, p. 355.

of invitation, a subtle persuasion, through direct emotional appeal. Within the context of the empathic image—its agency in public and private devotion—this rhetorical approach makes sense. In a commission for the church of San Domenico, the humor of the miserly Joseph fits quite well, as humor was a favored technique of the preaching orders in their sermons. The Dominicans, particularly, attracted audiences of merchants and bankers singularly focused on securing their economic positions; one can imagine Bartolo's miserly Joseph as model and cautionary figure on the Altar of the Three Kings in San Domenico. But humor of this type was not restricted to the Dominican context; humor, satire, and exempla bound the sermons of the Servites, Dominicans, and Franciscans of Tuscany. The Franciscans employed the *sermo humilis* most of all, as did Bernardino, to particular theatrical effect.⁴¹

There exists, therefore, a productive function for humor in Bartolo's altarpiece, which might be called a kind of analogous *imago humilis*. The Ciceronian 'lowly' style was adapted in the Gospels and in sermons, often peppered with the ornaments of humor, to convey a sublime truth unembellished by lofty prose. Through irony and humor, sacred images could also convey sublime truths, persuading and awakening the beholder through direct emotional appeal. The reaction of a smile or a laugh toward the image could refocus the viewer toward the image's key message, rather than detract from it. By acknowledging humor's important role in such image, rather than sanitizing or marginalizing it, we are able to understand how it amplified the altarpiece's sacred function in the context of Christian devotion.

Furthermore, the multivalent nature of Bartolo's Joseph suggests that the altarpiece functioned as something much more than a presentation of a set of morals. Rather, the audience was implicit in the making of meaning present therein. More than a mere call to reject sin by presenting straightforwardly sinful behavior, Joseph's imagery might be understood as highly engaging, even meditative, inviting the audience to reexamine the nuances of morality and how to best approach a broad spectrum of life's challenges. This diverges somewhat from concrete definitions of satire as expressing a "firm commitment to positive values contrary to the negative values it mocks,"⁴² for negativity, positivity, and culpability overlap across a thin line. Within the context of late fourteenth-century Siena, a work like Bartolo di Fredi's Adoration of the Magi, with its miserly Joseph, may be understood as a rather complex work. While upholding new ideals of fiscal responsibility preached in Siena, the 'treasurer' saint Joseph simultaneously subverts them by caricaturing the saint as a miser. But despite the mockery therein, the painting was not exempt from liturgical or devotional use. The centrality of satire within such an image can be attributed to many possible reasons, particularly a growing humanist interest in witty portrayals of popular biblical scenes. But the most powerful part of the multivalent image and its humor might lay in its ability to subvert institutional and economic ideals, even while supporting them—and all the while upholding that same institution's most sublime doctrinal messages.

⁴¹ L. BOLZONI, *The Web of Images: Vernacular Preaching from its Origins to St. Bernardino da Siena*, Burlington, 2004, pp. 124-25; LESNICK, *Preaching in Medieval Florence*, pp. 93-171.

⁴² DUVAL, "Rabelais and French Renaissance Satire," p. 72.

