

William R. Levin. *The Allegory of Mercy at the Misericordia in Florence: Historiography, Context, Iconography, and the Documentation of Confraternal Charity in the Trecento*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2004. Pp. viii, 180.

In the mid-fourteenth century, the Compagnia di Santa Maria della Misericordia was one of Florence's most important — and wealthiest — charitable confraternities; through the century's many crises — agricultural, epidemiological, demographic — the company was an important source of poor relief effected through a variety of activities, including almsgiving and the care of orphans and foundlings. In this essay-length book, art historian William R. Levin performs a close analysis of a fresco that once decorated the Compagnia's headquarters in Florence, in conjunction with historical research into the philanthropic activities of the confraternity in the fourteenth century. Although the fresco in question, the *Allegory of Mercy*, completed in 1342, has historically attracted little critical attention — an oversight Levin attributes to its current location in the small Museo del Bigallo — Levin seeks to foster appreciation of the painting's iconographical complexity and its greater contextual implications, with respect to both Florentine society and its patron, the Compagnia di Santa Maria della Misericordia. He believes the fresco is the work of art that “best captures the spirit and meaning of confraternal charity” (7). This book is both an art-historical inquiry examining a particular work of art and, by Levin's own admission, a “limited” historical study of a public beneficent institution in late medieval Florence.

Given the book's focus on a work of art and its patron, the primary audience is likely historians of late medieval and Renaissance Tuscan art or those interested in confraternity studies. However, Levin's historical research into the Compagnia's philanthropic activities and role in mid-fourteenth-century Florentine society also provides a rich socio-historical context for the study of Boccaccio's works. Levin's work with testamentary bequests (the Compagnia's primary source of funding) is especially interesting for the snapshot it provides of Florentine society at the time of the *Decameron's* writing. Throughout the book, Levin carefully analyzes the iconographic elements constituting the painting and ties them to archival research on the Compagnia's philanthropic activities in Florentine society; his thesis is always that the work of art “summarizes,” in singular fashion, the philosophy and theology behind this charitable organization. He is particularly interested in how the fresco was intended by its patron to fulfill multiple roles: didactic, inspirational, and, perhaps most interestingly,

as publicity and development for the Company. Levin continually stresses the close relationship and interplay between this work of art, its corporate patron, and the society of the time.

Although undocumented, the *Allegory of Mercy* fresco is believed to have been commissioned by the Compagnia di Santa Maria della Misericordia as part of their headquarters' artistic program and executed by an artist in the workshop of Bernardo Daddi (himself a student of Giotto) in 1342. The fresco originally faced onto the Piazza del Duomo until a renovation in 1777 removed the painting from public view; throughout the book, Levin stresses the significance of the painting's public accessibility. In the fresco, a large frontally-posed female figure, a personification of the Lord's Mercy, towers over smaller kneeling male (to her right, the position of privilege) and female figures (to her left). Eleven historiated roundels depicting the six canonical works of mercy, plus the non-canonical seventh, burial of the dead, decorate her cope. An early-Florentine cityscape, with Santa Croce and the Cathedral still under construction, is at the base of the fresco. The entire composition is framed by a decorative border representing the personified virtues; interspersed herein are an image of a stork defending its nest against a serpent and a pelican piercing its breast to feed its young. While similar in composition to the popular Madonna of Mercy image-type, the painting's central figure is commonly believed to be an allegorical representation of the Lord's Mercy rather than the Virgin Mary; on her crown are inscribed the words "Misericordia domini."

Chapters One and Two provide background material to the study, perhaps more of interest to art historians than literary critics. Chapter One provides a general introduction to the painting, to its patron, the Compagnia di Santa Maria della Misericordia, and to confraternity studies in general and the methodologies employed in that field (it also contains the author's musings on the gradual development of the book from an earlier doctoral dissertation), while Chapter Two, "The *Allegory of Mercy* in Art-Historical Scholarship," surveys the historiography of the *Allegory* and clarifies the painting's date, attribution, and subject.

Chapter Three, "The Historical Background: Wealth, Crisis, Philanthropy, Confraternity," explores the socio-historical and economic situation that led to the appearance of the Compagnia di Santa Maria della Misericordia in Florence. While this information is meant to help understand the fresco in its "conceptual and historical setting" (22), it is also relevant to literary critics seeking to place Boccaccio's works in their cultural context. In this chapter, Levin examines the evolution of the Compagnia from a devotional group concerned with the welfare of its own members to a charit-

able institution providing poor relief to the public. He considers this change in mission in light of greater developments in Florentine society, including shifts in theological and secular attitudes toward wealth and the many crises of the fourteenth century that made charity of fundamental importance.

Chapters Four and Five closely examine the iconographical and iconological significance of the central image and border details of the fresco. Chapter Four examines the central image with particular attention paid to the thirty-six figures at Mercy's side—all of whom are depicted in profile except for a man who gestures toward the Florentine cityscape to emphasize the confraternity's work on behalf of the commune. While individualized to a certain degree—their clothes indicate different occupations and social classes: women with and without wimples, a tonsured monk, a bishop, tradesmen—Levin prefers to consider them “types representing various walks of Florentine life in the trecento” (35) rather than historical individuals; he believes they may represent the confraternity's membership, its benefactors, or the needy recipients of the company's philanthropy. The figures are depicted in joined-hands prayer and Levin draws on feudal, Eucharistic, and sacramental associations to probe the pose's layers of meaning while stressing the reciprocity of the gesture: the figures ask the Lord for protection while swearing their loyalty and service (specifically, in the form of their charitable work as members of the confraternity) for which they hope to receive the Lord's grace or mercy. The chapter concludes by examining the painting's numerous inscriptions, eleven of which are contained within historiated roundels on Mercy's cope illustrating the seven works of mercy. Word and image work together in the painting to create a potent didactic message reminding members of the necessity to perform good works for others to gain God's mercy but also, more specifically, of the particular charitable works they should perform: visiting the imprisoned, feeding and giving drink to the hungry and thirsty, sheltering the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and burial of the dead. Levin returns to these illustrated roundels in the last chapter of the book, where he mines the company's archives to prove that the roundels were descriptive as well as prescriptive and that they depicted the Compagnia's actual philanthropic work.

Chapter Five examines the fresco's border details, with particular attention paid to the representation of the virtue Charity as a nursing mother and to an image of the pelican in her piety. In the early part of the chapter, Levin focuses on the novel choice to depict Charity as a nursing mother with but a single nursling. As Levin rightly notes, the decision to

portray the virtue as a nursing mother reflects both the long exegetical tradition connecting charity with breasts and milk, going back to the interpretation of the breasts of the bride in the Song of Songs as allegory for the dual nature of charity: *Amor Dei*, love of God, and *Amor proximi*, love of neighbor, as well as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries' progressive humanization of the divine. Prior to 1342, all visual representations of Charity nursing, such as Tino di Camaino's statue from 1321–32, included in the book's figures, depicted the virtue with two nurslings to express Charity's dual nature. In the *Allegory* fresco, however, in what Levin believes is the earliest extant example of the new image-type, Charity suckles only one infant at her breast. By reducing the number of nurslings, Levin believes the artist was able to link the representation of the virtue Charity to the ancient nursing Madonna image-type (so ably explored in Victor Lasareff's seminal study of the *Virgo lactans*). He draws a parallel between the way in which Charity as a nursing mother "impersonates" the nursing Madonna image-type and the way that the central figure of Mercy conjures up the Madonna of Mercy image-type. In both cases, the *Allegory* figures gain accreted significance due to the Virgin's traditional association with charity and to her role as patroness of the confraternity.

While Levin thoroughly explores theological and iconographical sources for the depiction of Charity as a nursing mother in this chapter, he spends little time relating the image to contemporary Florentine society: he notes only in passing, and in a comment buried in a footnote, that the image may also have been intended as a reference to the confraternity's work with orphans and foundlings, seen in other works in the Compagnia's decorative program (most intriguingly, in a fresco entitled *The Consignment of Abandoned Children and Orphans to Natural and Adoptive Mothers* from 1386). While Levin is afraid of being thought "overly zealous" in this interpretation, his connection of the image to the confraternity's charitable work with children seems just. Infants and children in the late Middle Ages faced dreadfully high mortality rates, with upwards of one in three dying before the age of one, but social historians have found that for orphans and foundlings the odds were even worse. Cut off from their mothers' care, foundlings' existence was precarious and, above all, dependent on the supply of high-quality milk. Foundling hospitals typically employed wet-nurses to ensure an adequate supply of milk for their charges, since animal milk, in addition to presenting problems of preservation, was believed to transmit the bestial qualities of the animal. Against this social historical backdrop, the image of Charity nursing a child could refer, therefore, not just to the confraternity's work with children but also

to the particulars of that occupation: the procurement and employment of wet-nurses, of crucial importance in orphans' and foundlings' lives. Although Levin does not explore this particular connection, he justly notes that "it would be unwise to question the subtlety of Christian iconographers, especially during the late-medieval period" (57). The theological sources and Marian analogues to the image are a fundamental part of the picture, but considering social history makes the image increasingly resonant, and certainly is further proof for Levin's argument for the fresco's iconographical complexity and greater contextual implications.

In the latter part of Chapter Five, Levin examines the image of a pelican piercing its breast to feed its young, contained within a diamond-shaped compartment in the fresco's upper border. Based in part on the conflation of two biblical passages with a penitential psalm, the connection between the pelican who pierces its chest to revive, or feed, its young and Christ, Who redeems His followers through His sacrifice, was well known and common in both art and literature by the late Middle Ages. Versions of the pelican legend varied depending on the source, but the birds were believed to possess the power to resurrect their children through their own blood, whether offered as ablution or nourishment; the allegorical significance of the pelican as a Christological symbol was a commonplace (for an example in one of the *tre corone*, see *Paradiso* XXV.112–13). Levin connects the pelican image to the fresco's larger program demonstrating the mercy or forgiveness of the Lord, but he does not consider how it might relate to the image of Charity nursing an infant discussed earlier. According to medieval medical writers, nursing mothers fed their children with redirected menstrual blood that was purified, or boiled, by the breasts into milk. Due to the close connection of blood with breast milk in the medieval imaginary, the nursing mother herself was likened to the pelican and often, by extension, to Christ. The image of Charity as a nursing mother, therefore, while owing its existence to theological writings connecting milk and mercy, could also be understood as a reference to the specific historical practices of the confraternity, at the same time as it functions as a gloss on the Christological symbol of the pelican in her piety. Levin spends the remainder of the chapter exploring the painting's other Christological symbols: the Lamb of God, a stork attacking serpents, and the Tau on Mercy's crown.

In the final chapter, "The Misericordia Confraternity and the Seven Works of Mercy," Levin employs archival evidence to support his thesis that the roundels on Mercy's cope were not just abstract illustrations of the biblical works of mercy but actually depicted the philanthropic activities of

the company and, therefore, that the painting fulfilled inspirational, didactic, and publicity-oriented functions. Levin believes the fresco both reminded members of the works they should perform to gain God's grace and promoted the Company's eleemosynary work; he writes, "the written record clarifies the purpose of the *Allegory of Mercy* fresco, which was that of a perpetually open inspirational manual instructing and reminding members of the company (and others) of what they must do in the here and now in order to reach God in the hereafter" (84). Unfortunately, as Levin notes, the "written record" of the Compagnia's early years (the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries) is rather slim; Levin utilizes whatever archival evidence he can to document the company's philanthropic activities in the years preceding the *Allegory* painting and then ties those documented activities one by one to the works of mercy depicted on Mercy's cope. This chapter is interesting insofar as it presents anecdotal and archival evidence of the company's activities and of Florentines' interactions with the company, whether as benefactors or recipients of services, as seen in testamentary bequests and the company's record books. While one can feel, at times, that Levin stretches to make the company's charitable activities correspond to all the works of mercy, as when he interprets a testamentary bequest that the Compagnia distribute two pairs of bed sheets to eight Florentine hospitals as proof of members' fulfillment of the fifth work of mercy, care for the sick, no doubt this is the result of the patchy nature of the confraternity's early records; Levin himself admits that evidence for some practices is slim. Whatever the charitable practice, Levin is especially successful at documenting "where the money came from" since the bulk of his information about the Company's philanthropic activities is derived from testamentary volumes detailing what portion of their estates wealthy testators set aside for charitable purposes. In this chapter, he also considers the Company's role in burying the poor, undocumented in these early years but performed extensively in the early sixteenth century, and the confraternity's special veneration of Tobit.

In the concluding chapter, Levin reiterates the fresco's very public message. Facing out onto the Piazza del Duomo, and therefore accessible to both confraternal and Florentine society, the painting reminded members of the necessity of performing charitable works, and of the specific works to perform, to gain the Lord's favor, at the same time as it publicized and promoted the Confraternity's philanthropic work and role in Florentine society as a secular beneficent institution. For those familiar with Boccaccio's description of the plague in the *Decameron's* Introduction, it is perhaps not surprising that the effects of the plague are seen on both sides of

the philanthropic equation only a few years after the fresco's completion: Levin notes an increase after 1348 in both testamentary bequests to the Company (whether in the form of money, real estate, or, often, entire farms) and in the number of those in need of the confraternity's services.

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