



PASSION, CHARISMA AND GENDER
IN AN ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT
OF BONAVENTURE'S LIFE OF SAINT FRANCIS

PASIÓN, CARISMA Y GÉNERO EN UN MANUSCRITO ILUMINADO
DE LA VIDA DE SAN FRANCISCO DE SAN BUENAVENTURA

Holly Flora^{a*}

Fechas de recepción y aceptación: 24 de febrero de 2021 y 4 de marzo de 2021

Abstract: Written by then-Master General of the Franciscan Order, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, the *Legenda maior* was declared the Order's only official account of Francis' life in 1266. Hundreds of surviving manuscripts of the *Legenda maior* attest to the text's popularity in the late middle ages and early Renaissance, but somewhat surprisingly, only a handful of such manuscripts are illustrated. Among these unusual, illuminated copies of the *Legenda* is a mid- fourteenth century codex known as MS 411, now kept in the Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele II in Rome. The manuscript contains seventeen miniatures or historiated initials altogether, each introducing a chapter of Bonaventure's *Legenda*. Remarkably, a kneeling woman is shown in supplication before Francis on at least four folios; she is likely the book's primary reader. In this paper, I will discuss the repeated inclusion of this woman's image in the manuscript, arguing that her likeness reveals how the *vita* of Francis was uniquely appropriated as a devotional tool for her. Intended as a précis to a longer book project, my study here raises larger questions about Franciscan texts, illustrated manuscripts, and lay devotion in Italy in Trecento.

^a Art Department Faculty. Tulane University.

* Correspondencia: Tulane University. Art Department Faculty. 202 Woldenberg Art Center 6823 St. Charles Ave. New Orleans, Louisiana 70118. Estados Unidos de América.

E-mail: hflora@tulane.edu



Keywords: passion, genre, illuminated manuscript, saint francis, hagiography.

Resumen: Escrito por el entonces Maestro General de la Orden Franciscana, Buenaventura de Bagnoregio, la *Legenda maior* fue declarada el único relato oficial de la vida de san Francisco de la Orden en 1266. Cientos de manuscritos sobrevivientes de la *Legenda maior* dan fe de la popularidad del texto a finales de la Edad Media y principios del Renacimiento, pero sorprendentemente, solo se ilustra una pequeña cantidad de esos manuscritos. Entre estas copias inusuales e iluminadas de la *Legenda* se encuentra un códice de mediados del siglo XIV, conocido como MS 411, que ahora se conserva en la Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele II de Roma. El manuscrito contiene diecisiete miniaturas o iniciales historiadadas en total, donde cada una presenta un capítulo de la *Legenda* de Buenaventura. Sorprende cómo una mujer arrodillada se muestra en súplica ante san Francisco en, al menos, cuatro folios; probablemente sea la lectora principal del libro. En este artículo se debate la inclusión repetida de la imagen de esta mujer en el manuscrito, argumentando que su semejanza revela cómo la *vita* de san Francisco se convirtió en un instrumento devocional para ella. Pensado como resumen de un proyecto futuro, este estudio plantea preguntas importantes sobre los textos franciscanos, los manuscritos ilustrados y la devoción laica en Italia en el Trecento.

Palabras clave: pasión, género, manuscrito iluminado, san Francisco, hagiografía.

Written by then-Master General of the Franciscan Order, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, the *Legenda maior* was declared the Order's only official account of Francis' life in 1266¹. Bonaventure's biography thus became an essential propaganda tool for the Franciscan Order as they promoted Francis' personal charisma, the extraordinary spiritual gifts that conditioned his sanctity². Hundreds of surviving manuscripts of the *Legenda maior* attest to the text's popularity in the late middle ages and early Renaissance, but somewhat surprisingly, only a handful of such manuscripts are illustrated. Among these unusual, illuminated

¹ For discussion see, for example, Alberzoni (1997).

² Bonaventure was chosen by the Lesser Brothers to write the new biography in 1260 and presented both the *Legenda Maior* and the *Legenda Minor* in 1263. See Armstrong, Hellmann and Short (2001, pp. 21-23).



copies of the *Legenda* is a mid- fourteenth century codex known as MS 411, now kept in the Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele II in Rome³. Written in Latin, in an elegant, tidy Gothic script, and embellished with gold leaf and jewel-like colors, this is a luxury codex, despite containing the story of a saint devoted to poverty. The manuscript contains seventeen miniatures or historiated initials altogether, each introducing a chapter of Bonaventure's *Legenda*.

Remarkably, a kneeling woman is shown in supplication before Francis on at least four folios; she is likely the book's primary reader. In this paper, I will discuss the repeated inclusion of this woman's image in the manuscript, arguing that her likeness reveals how the *vita* of Francis was uniquely appropriated as a devotional tool for her. Intended as a *précis* to a longer book project, my study here raises larger questions about Franciscan texts, illustrated manuscripts, and lay devotion in Italy in Trecento. I will start by presenting some basic information about MS 411 itself, and then move into discussions of each image in which the kneeling laywoman appears.

1. MS 411: AN INTRODUCTION

Despite its importance as a rare, illustrated copy of Francis's *vita*, MS 411 has received relatively little attention from scholars.⁴ A few excellent short essays in Italian, including those by Silvia Mazzini, Francesca Manzari, and Milvia Bollati, have addressed questions about the manuscript's date and origins⁵.

Although earlier studies located the codex in Emilia-Romagna, Francesca Manzari convincingly localized and dated MS 411 to Milan circa 1350. Her arguments are based on stylistic comparisons with an unknown missal in the Vatican Library, as well as her discovery of a dated manuscript, painted in 1350

³ On this manuscript, see the excellent short study (Mazzini, 2000).

⁴ MS 411 was acquired by the Biblioteca Nazionale from a private collection in 1891. Its earlier history is unknown. It was exhibited in a landmark 1953 exhibition in Rome; Muzzioli (1954, pp. 153-154, cat. No. 224).

⁵ In addition to the Mazzini study cited above, see Manzari (2014a, pp. 711-724) and for earlier bibliography on MS 411 and a brief analysis of its iconography, see Bollati (2014, pp. 725-737).



in Milan, by the same illuminator, now in the Ambrosiana Library. Manzari also rightly pointed out that MS 411 is an unusual adaptation of the text of the *Legenda* for devotional use⁶. Unlike in northern Europe, where books of hours were already becoming the most popular devotional text for lay readers, in Italy we find fewer books of hours and more instances of other texts being illustrated for use in personal meditation⁷.

Thus as Manzari (2014) has pointed out, MS 411's text-image structure is very much influenced by other types of manuscripts produced in this period⁸. The illuminations vary in format and size; some are rectangular miniatures, as seen in the frontispiece (Figure 1), while in other cases, one or more scenes are embedded within historiated initials, as at the beginning of Chapter 5 (Figure 2), recalling the illustration of antiphonaries or other liturgical manuscripts. In one instance, to introduce Chapter 3 on the founding of the Franciscan Order, three scenes presented are vertically in a series of quaterfoils, dividing the two columns of text on the page, a structure echoing that seen in illuminated bibles (Figure 3). The illuminator therefore synthesized various strategies of illustration to present Francis' life for his aristocratic female reader.

The manuscript lacks heraldry or inscriptions that would help to identify its original owner or owners, but visual clues about them can be seen throughout the manuscript. The frontispiece shows Christ as the Man of Sorrows flanked by the Virgin at the viewer's left and John the Evangelist on the right (Figure 1). The Virgin presents a friar, who kneels behind a haloed figure of St Francis and a smaller friar who wears a red cardinal's hat. The diminutive friar may be intended as Bonaventure, the text's author, who had not yet been canonized (Bollati, 2014, p. 729). John presents a kneeling female figure wearing a veil, wimple, and a green dress decorated with a row of tiny white buttons. The same female supplicant appears later in the manuscript wearing blue, kneel-

⁶ Manzari discusses the production and use of books of hours for devotional purposes, see Manzari (2013, pp. 153-209). See also Manzari (2010, pp. 141-160).

⁷ In a number of Manzari's publications, there is discussion surrounding the lack of production and use of books of hours in Italy in comparison to other parts of Europe. See Manzari (2014c, pp. 21-41; 2014b, 269-299; 2010, pp. 141-160).

⁸ See Manzari (2004, pp. 1-16); Frugoni and Manzari (2006); Manzari (2014a, pp. 711-724; 2014b, pp. 269-299).



ing beneath an image of Francis among animals (Figure 4), within a scene of Francis' stigmatization (Figure 5), and kneeling before Francis in glory in the manuscript's final image (Figure 6). She is therefore the most likely candidate for the primary reader or owner of the book. The kneeling friar who is shown in the frontispiece and in the final image is perhaps a relative or may be the woman's spiritual advisor; his appearance at the beginning and end of the text implicates him as a devotional guide or advocate (Mazzini, Ms. 411, p. 12). Luxury books such as this were often used by families in this period, so if indeed the friar and the woman were related, we cannot rule out the possibility that he too could be considered a reader of this manuscript.⁹

In her outstanding study of supplicant figures in French books of hours, Alexa Sand has argued that such depictions are intentionally self-reflexive, allowing aristocratic, and often female, readers to see themselves appropriating spiritual truths as they looked at their own images alongside those of the holy figures (Sand, 2014, p. 158).

As such these figures were not simply commemorative, but helped actively engage a manuscript's readers in spiritual self-scrutiny on a path to repentance and redemption. In MS 411, which, as mentioned earlier, seems to appropriate certain elements from books of hours, a similar strategy is at play. By gazing on her own image portrayed alongside that of Francis and other spiritual models, the female reader could envision herself personally witnessing Francis' life and actively partaking in his sanctity. To explore how this mode of personalized meditation on Francis' life might have worked for the female reader, I will now discuss each of the four, possibly five, images in MS 411 where she is included. We will follow this reader on a journey through this manuscript, tracing her devotional progress through the life of Francis.

2. LEARNING BY HIS EXAMPLE: THE FRONTISPIECE

As previously mentioned, the frontispiece is where the first depiction of the kneeling woman occurs in MS 411 (Figure 1). Significantly, she is shown

⁹ See, for example, Smith (2003).



kneeling alongside Francis, Saint Bonaventure, and the unknown friar before an image of Christ as the “Man of Sorrows,” an iconography borrowed from Byzantine visual traditions. Later termed “Man of Sorrows” in reference to Isaiah 53’s description of the Messiah’s suffering, this kind of image, also sometimes called an *imago pietatis*, found favor with the Franciscans, who emphasized Christ’s suffering in their theology.¹⁰ Here, Christ emerges from a stone sarcophagus, shown nude from the waist up with his arms crossed in front of him, his head bowed, and eyes closed. Christ’s head slumps toward the viewer’s left, directly facing the figure of Francis just below him. The Man of Sorrows here is flanked by Mary and John the Evangelist, the two saints who witnessed Christ’s Crucifixion, who serve here also to present the manuscript’s two readers, the friar and the woman. The frontispiece here therefore serves multiple purposes. First, it is an iconic devotional image upon which the readers might meditate. At the same time, the inclusion of the female reader’s image, along with those of the other figures, sets up a broader instructional mode for her reading of the entire manuscript.

Shown at right, facing the three male supplicants who are also included, the female reader looks up toward the face of Christ, mirroring the gazes of both John and Mary. Her focus on them, as well as John’s presentation of her, suggest first that her primary focus should be on Christ himself. And yet there is a further layer to this prescribed devotion to Christ’s Passion. At left, Francis is shown kneeling, gazing directly into the still-bleeding side wound of Christ. The unnamed friar, who, as will be discussed further later, may be related to the kneeling woman, kneels directly behind Francis and, like the saint, looks intently at the wound in Christ’s side. The gazes of these two friars suggest another kind of intimacy with Christ’s suffering, one consistent with the general Franciscan emphasis on Christ’s wounds, but more specifically expressed in meditation on the side wound.

By the time of this manuscript’s making in the mid fourteenth century, the side wound had become the subject of more widespread devotion. For example, it is depicted in enlarged form on the pages of several Books of Hours from

¹⁰ On the Franciscans and the iconography of the Man of Sorrows see Seubert (2011, pp. 28-32).



this period, including some made for female readers, like the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg (Figure 7)¹¹.

In some of these examples, the image of the wound resembles (at least to some modern scholars) the image of a vagina, calling to mind medieval devotional literature connecting the love and suffering of Christ to motherhood and procreation¹². In itself, then, the side wound became a focal point in prayerbooks, serving as a visual portal for devotees to enter imaginatively into Christ's crucified body.

On the frontispiece of MS 411, the attention paid by Francis and the friar to Christ's side wound sets them up as devotional models whose conduct might inspire the woman to deepen her own meditative experience of Christ's suffering. As we shall see later, the kneeling woman herself is eventually granted visual access to the same wound as it appears on Francis' body during his Stigmatization. For now, she might look at the frontispiece and note how Francis himself, and the friar she probably knew personally, might serve as examples for devotion to Christ's Passion. As will be discussed further below, the side wound also had especial meaning for the Order because of some of the details revealed in Francis' own hagiography¹³.

There is one more detail in the frontispiece that points the female reader squarely towards Francis' life as an example. In contrast to all of the other figures in the image, including the woman, the kneeling cardinal, who is probably Bonaventure, turns his eyes not to Christ, but to the kneeling woman. Presented by Francis, Bonaventure thus seemingly invites the woman to enter into the experience of Christ's suffering through the recounting of Francis' life that is in the book in her hands. As Bonaventure states in the Prologue (the very text to which this image relates):

The grace of God our Savior has appeared in these last days in his servant Francis to all who are truly humble and lovers of holy poverty, who, while venerating him in God's superabundant mercy, learn by his example to reject

¹¹ On this prayerbook, now in the Cloisters Collection, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, see for example Hand (2013, pp. 13-14, 105-8, 146-49, 158, figs. 3.1-3.2).

¹² See, for example, Easton (2006, pp. 395-414) and Lewis (1997, pp. 204-229).

¹³ See, for example, discussion in Chatterjee (2014, pp. 163-206).



wholeheartedly ungodliness and worldly passions, to live in conformity with Christ and to thirst after blessed hope with unflagging desire (Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2001, p. 492).

The frontispiece here therefore marks Bonaventure's text as a means by which the reader might venerate Francis and "learn by his example." The images that follow that include the female reader serve as signposts for her as she journeys through Francis' life.

3. POVERTY AND CHARISMA: THE THREE VIRTUES

The kneeling image of the woman does not appear again in the manuscript until later. Meanwhile, through the next five images following the frontispiece, the reader observes Francis' path to conversion. The journey begins with Francis' donation of his cloak to a beggar and his dream of the Palace of Arms (Figure 8) and continues with the scene of his prayer and vision in the church of San Damiano, paired with his public renunciation of his father's wealth (Figure 9). The reader continues to follow Francis' path to sanctity as she observes the scenes of the Dream of Pope Innocent III and the approval of the friars' rule (Figure 3), and the arrival of Francis and his early brothers at the hermitage of Rivortorto (Figure 10). Francis' spiritual gifts then start to emerge more and more dramatically, as he is able to endure the cauterization of his optic nerve without pain (Figure 2) and drives demons from the city of Arezzo (Figure 11).

It is this context that we can begin to understand the progressive nature of the image program of MS 411. At this point in the text of the *Legenda*, Bonaventure begins to speak explicitly of Francis' charismatic gifts and his ability to grow in them. Devotion to poverty is the ultimate key to this growth for Francis, and the illumination placed at the beginning of Chapter 7 shows two episodes relating to that virtue (Figure 12). The first is an incident in which a companion of Francis witnesses a bag of money turn into a serpent, and then encounter between Francis and the three personified virtues: poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Mazzini has pointed out that the three figures here seem to be represented in the three stages of womanhood – virgin (the figure in red and blue), wife (the



central figure who has a wimple) and widow (the figure closest to the viewer with wimple and veil) (Ms. 411, pp. 22-23). As outlined in the twelfth century female monastic text, the *Speculum virginum*, these three stages of womanhood also represent a hierarchy of spiritual perfection, with the virgin, who personifies poverty here, as the ultimate model¹⁴. Mazzini also noted that the widow depicted resembles the figure of the book owner (Ms. 411, pp. 22-23). If indeed this image is intended to refer to her, it would serve not only as a reference to her possible current state of life (as a widow), but also encourage devotion to the virtues Francis espoused, leading to spiritual perfection.

As I began to consider the question of the female supplicant and her interest in the life of Francis, I found recent discussions of charisma to be helpful. Since September 11, 2001, there has been increased interest in public discourse and among scholars in notions of charismatic authority, both as it concerns preaching, for example in the Islamic world pre-and post 9/11, and also in the world leaders that have been elected since that time. But how do we understand charisma now and how is it different than the way fourteenth century audiences understood it? Today's *Oxford English Dictionary* (2020 Ed.) defines charisma in very broad terms, as the "compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire devotion in others". Modern concepts of charisma thus center on the magnetism of an individual. Similar notions are seen in the sociological theories of Weber, who almost a century ago wrote of charisma in terms of a cult of personality:

A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual is treated as a leader [. . .] What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his "followers" or "disciples" (Weber, 1947, p. 329).

For Weber, the charisma of an individual also depends heavily on those who become subject to that person's extraordinary powers. As a public relations

¹⁴ See discussion in Mazzini (Ms. 411, pp. 22-23), and also Frugoni (1995, p. 425, fig. 2).



strategy as well as an act of devotion, Pope Francis took Francis of Assisi as his namesake because of the way modern audiences understand the saint's charisma, as a product of personal charm and spiritual gifts. Saint Francis' exceptional piety and humility endowed him with such gifts to an extreme, as he was gifted with the physical experience of Christ's suffering via his stigmata¹⁵.

Weberian and religious notions of charisma have also garnered interest recently among scholars of medieval and early modern Europe. Jaeger has noted how Francis' life has been considered charismatic both in terms of modern and medieval usages of the term (Jaeger, 2018, pp. 181-204) and Gustafson has explored Bonaventure's take on charisma as it influenced the spatial organization of Franciscan architecture Gustafson (2018, pp. 323-347). Although scholars note the connection between Weber's theories of charisma and the traditional religious usage of the term, Gustafson has pointed out some crucial distinctions between Weberian concepts of charisma and its meaning in a medieval Christian context.

The word "charisma" derives from the Greek "Kharis" meaning "a free gift or favor specially vouchsafed by God; a grace, a talent". Its usage Christian traditions derives from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, listing spiritual gifts such as wisdom, faith, knowledge, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing among spirits, and speaking in and interpreting tongues¹⁶. Paul goes on to implore the church at Corinth to, ". . . be zealous for better gifts [*charismata meliora* in the Vulgate]. And I show you yet a more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31). Receipt of such gifts of the Holy Spirit was in fact fundamental to the process of redemption. Thus unlike Weber, for whom charisma depends on the divine anointment of an individual, in the Pauline tradition there is the potential for all Christians to receive spiritual gifts through the cultivation of virtues.

Bonaventure outlines a pursuit of the charismatic gifts involving a spiritual progression (Gustafson, 2018, pp. 336-339). God bestows spiritual gifts, but these gifts also function as a means to the soul's eventual perfection. Even for Francis himself, who was gifted beyond the capacity of most individuals, the

¹⁵ The film entitled *Pope Francis: A Man of His Word* was released on May 18, 2018.

¹⁶ Gustafson (2018, p. 334) continues his discussion about the gifts in the Pauline tradition and the following portion of the letter on p. 335.



spiritual gifts allowed him to progress in his piety towards his ultimate conformity with Christ seen in his receipt of the stigmata. In the *Legenda maior*, for example, Bonaventure writes that, “Among the gifts of charisms which Francis obtained from the generous Giver, he merited, as a special privilege, to grow in the riches of simplicity through his love of the highest poverty” (Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2001, p. 577).

Francis received holy gifts, but then “grew” in them. According to Bonaventure, the potential for growth in virtue and piety was possible for all Christians; by following Francis’ example, God-given spiritual gifts could be cultivated. Thus by following Francis’ path to charisma through the first sections of MS 411, the female reader, too, could begin to appropriate Francis’ example for herself.

4. FRANCIS AND THE ANIMALS

Visual evidence that the female reader of MS 411 has made progress on her journey to follow Francis’ example comes in the next part of the manuscript. Here we see her likeness depicted in an obvious way for the second time at the start of Chapter 8, a chapter focused on the theme of Francis’ pious and uncanny ability to communicate with creatures. In the image that begins this chapter, one that is iconographically unique, Francis stands in prayer facing the viewer in a luxuriously verdant garden abloom with colorful flowers (Figure 4).

The saint is surrounded by birds flying around him and perching on his shoulders and arm, as a lamb, an ox, and even a dog leap towards him from the ground below. Below him, our female supplicant appears for the second time in the manuscript, wearing her signature veil and wimple and a blue gown decorated with a row of tiny buttons on her sleeves. She occupies a separate space from Francis, but her gaze seems to penetrate the rectangle that encloses him to focus on his bare toes peeking out from under his robe. I would like to suggest that the designers of the manuscript placed the female reader’s image here as part of a strategy of training her in a progressive spiritual journey through Francis’ life, as discussed above. Through devotion to poverty, seen in the previous image of the widow shown as one of the three Virtues and modeled through Francis’ example, the viewer begins to gain closer access to



Francis. Although still separated from him by the physical barriers of the two rectangles that enclose her and Francis, she is nonetheless positioned now to venerate Francis in greater proximity, and without the mediation of the figures in the frontispiece.

This chapter would have been particularly relevant for a female lay reader because of the story recounted here of an early female lay follower of Francis, Lady Jacoba of Settisoli (1190-1273). Several early sources relate that Jacoba was a woman of noble birth from Rome. Widowed at a young age, she heard about Francis and met the saint when he journeyed to Rome to obtain approval for the Order's Rule. The saint honored this noblewoman by calling her "Brother Jacoba" and she joined the Franciscan Third Order (Pryds, 2015, pp. 15-34).

Among the many tales Bonaventure collects in Chapter 8 of the *Legenda maior* is one where Francis was in Rome, and had brought a lamb with him, "out of reverence to the most gentle Lamb of God". According to the text, he left the lamb in the care of Lady Jacoba. The lamb became the noble woman's companion; the lamb even attended church with her and demonstrated to her how to genuflect before the altar. The lamb, "which was Francis' disciple and had now become a master of devotion, was held by the lady as an object of wonder and love" (Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2001, p. 592). It is no accident, then, that the lamb shown in MS 411 appears just above the image of the female reader. In fact the lamb's posture of genuflection before Francis mirrors that of the woman kneeling directly below him, a visual cue perhaps referring to the example of Jacoba's lamb in Rome. Within MS 411's presentation of Francis as a model, then, Lady Jacoba, who like the kneeling woman was also a laywoman and a widow, is offered as another example of piety for the reader to imitate. Later in MS 411, too, references to Lady Jacoba offer further means for the female lay reader to gain intimate access to Francis.

It is notable, however, that at this stage in the reader's journey through the life of Francis, her access to him is still limited. Although she is now shown on the same page as Francis, her eyes traveling upwards towards his feet, she is nonetheless separated from him. Francis' feet here do not show evidence of the stigmata. It is all the more remarkable, then, that the wound in his side is visible here for the first time in the manuscript, even though the episode of the stigmata has yet to be described in Bonaventure's text. Francis' cloak opens in just the right place, parted in the shape of a madorla to reveal the



bloody wound. This detail is significant because it was the wound in Francis' side that elicited the most controversy from those who doubted the saint's true conformity to Christ (Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2001, p. 471). Through Francis' embrace of the virtue of poverty, as seen in the chapter before this one, the fullness of his sanctity –signified by his stigmata, especially the side wound– begins to be revealed to the viewer. This image is therefore a prelude to the much deeper access to Francis that the viewer is given the next time her likeness appears in MS 411.

5. SUPPLICATION AND PROXIMITY: THE STIGMATA

Following the image of Francis surrounded by creatures, the reader continues to be led through the text, guided by illustrations of well-known episodes of Francis' life in which he appears before the sultan (Figure 13), is tempted by demons and performs the miraculous mass at Greccio (Figure 14), revives the dead knight at Celano (Figure 15), and preaches to birds and to followers at Gaeta (Figure 16). After this, she reaches the apogee of Francis' piety –his stigmatization, into which our female devotee is, most unusually, actually inserted (Mazzini, Ms. 411, p. 29, Figure 5).

The illustration to Chapter 13, titled “The Sacred Stigmata,” features Francis kneeling on the ground in front of a chapel, his arms outstretched to meet the red rays emanating from the wounds of Christ in the guise of a six-winged seraph before him. Set in the wilderness, this event features a “witness” in the form of a friar who sits behind Francis, holding a red book. All of these elements are typical of the iconography of Francis' stigmata current in the mid-fourteenth century¹⁷. What is highly unusual, however, is the inclusion of a supplicant figure, the widow, within the scene. Garbed in blue, one of her signature colors, she kneels directly in front of Francis. The shift in the placement of the viewer's image from outside Francis' space to inside it echoes the division of spaces in Franciscan churches as mirroring Bonaventure's concept of the progressive *habiti*, as Gustafson has underscored (Gustafson, 2018). The woman has thus

¹⁷ For the iconography of the stigmatization of Francis see Frugoni (2010, pp. 212-213).



been transformed from separated supplicant to firsthand witness, precisely the kind of spiritual progression that was recommended in Franciscan devotional literature of this period, both by Bonaventure and the anonymous author of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (Flora, 2009).

Most amazingly, the woman's gaze is fixed firmly on the wound in Francis' side. I know of no other example from this period of an image featuring a laywoman shown so close to Francis at his stigmatization. Francis' own companion shown with him in the scene does not actually seem to witness the stigmatization; his gaze is down at the book in his hands. In fact, Francis only told a few select followers about his experience on Mount La Verna, and according to Bonaventure, he carefully hid the signs of his stigmata (Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2001, p. 634).

The side wound he guarded especially, “. . . so cautiously concealed that as long as he was alive no one could see it except by stealth” (Ibidem, p. 636). The illustrators of MS 411 seem to underscore the fact that Francis wished to keep this wound secret, the scene chosen to illustrate Chapter 14, “His Patience and Passing in Death,” comes from the text of the middle of that chapter (Figure 17).

In a highly unusual scene, one that falls outside the typical iconographic canon of Francis' life, Francis is shown naked on the ground. In this episode from Francis' vita, while near death the saint stripped himself naked, writhing on the ground, wishing his final moments to fight “the enemy” and “wrestle naked with the naked.” While upon the ground, Francis covered the wound in his right side, “so no one would see it” (Ibidem, p. 642). The detail of Francis covering his side wound is prominently illustrated in the scene included in MS 411.

How, then, is the female reader of the manuscript to think about the incredible privilege given to her own image portrayed in close access to the saint's side wound? She is to imagine herself having that firsthand access while contemplating Francis' life in the manuscript. Her focus on Francis' wound was learned from observing Francis himself; in the frontispiece, we saw how she observed Francis' similarly intense contemplation of Christ's side wound Mazzini (Ms. 411, p. 30; Figure 1). To gain this kind of direct visual access to Francis' wound, however, the reader had to take a progressive journey through the text and images of MS 411.



Devotion to poverty is key to this access, as we have seen in the above discussion of Bonaventure's conception of charisma –that is the use of God-given spiritual gifts for spiritual growth. By focusing on Francis' gifts, gained through his devotion to poverty, the devotee nurtures her own spiritual gifts and gains access to Francis. Poverty is also a key theme in understanding the image of Francis naked on the ground that prefaces Chapter 14 (Figure 17).

While covering the wound in his side, Francis reaches with his other hand for a cord and tunic offered by his “guardian” friar. In the end, he leaves this world with no possessions; even his clothing is borrowed from another. In this way, according to Bonaventure, the saint “kept faith until the end with Lady Poverty” (Armstrong, Hellmann and Short, 2001, p. 642). The female reader would therefore again be reminded that devotion to poverty is the key to attaining intimacy with Francis and be reminded of her own privileged status in having seen Francis' side wound and indeed witnessed his stigmatization herself.

6. DEATH AND MIRACLES

As previously mentioned, the death of Francis scene in MS 411 is a highly unusual one (Figure 17). It offers further potential for the reader to imagine herself as a firsthand witness to Francis' life and death. Here too Lady Jacoba might also have served as a devotional model for the reader. Although Bonaventure does not include her in the *Legenda maior's* account of Francis' death, at least five other hagiographic accounts describe her presence at the time of the saint's death.¹⁸ According to these accounts, she was summoned to Francis' deathbed in Assisi by the saint, miraculously arriving with her large retinue from Rome in time to see him. Francis requested that she bring a number of items with her, including an almond confection and a tunic.

Although different versions of this story occur in each of the accounts, essentially Jacoba is noted as being at Francis' side at the moment of his death, weeping over him at her feet as she gazed upon the nail marks left there. By

¹⁸ For the hagiographic accounts of Lady Jacoba's presence at Francis' death, see Pryds (2015, pp. 20-21).



some accounts, too, she paid for his funeral and made the arrangements for it. Thus, despite her status as a rich noblewoman, Jacoba became a witness to Francis' death and a benefactor of the early cult of the saint. While there is no direct reference to Jacoba in MS 411's image program, as we have seen above, indirect references to her may be found for example in the artists' inclusion of a lamb in the image beginning Chapter 8.

The image beginning Chapter 14 (Figure 17) while only including the friars as per Bonaventure's account of the event, might nonetheless have inspired the reader to think of Jacopa, who perhaps provided Francis with a tunic and also bore witness to the saint's death. Compositionally, in this image Francis is portrayed with his fellow friars behind him; there is no one between the reader and the body of Francis. Perhaps the female reader then could imaginatively insert herself into the scene, contemplating Francis' death.

The reader would then perhaps also mentally join the procession shown in the following image of the translation of Francis' body to the church of San Giorgio where it was venerated until the completion of the saint's Basilica a few years later (Figure 18). Finally, she would arrive at the final image in the manuscript where Francis is shown glorified in the upper register of the initial prefacing the tract on Francis' miracles (Figure 6). In the upper portion of the initial, Francis is shown in half-length, one hand in blessing and the other holding a book.

Set against the gleaming gold leaf background, this unusual image of Francis blessing recalls Byzantine images of Christ Pantokrator. He is flanked by the kneeling female reader on his left and the kneeling friar seen in the frontispiece on the right. Francis' sanctity is affirmed by the pilgrims shown below who appeal to the saint in their cries for healing, some holding crutches or displaying distorted limbs. This image encapsulates the power of the saint for healing as described in many of the posthumous miracles included in this chapter.

Once again, here, the devotee is granted exceptionally close access to the saint—much closer proximity than that enjoyed by the pilgrims clamoring below. Enabled by her progression through his *vita*, the reader has finally reached the point where she can commune with Francis himself. However, if we think of the friar as a potential spiritual advisor, his reappearance suggests that she has done this in part with his supervision of and approval of the devotee's journey through Francis' life.



7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what does this manuscript suggest about this woman's appropriation of Francis' charisma in her devotional life? In this unique adaptation of his vita, Francis is a model of charisma for the devotee to imitate. This presentation of a male exemplar for a female viewer stands in contrast to the frequent Franciscan trope of presenting devotional models along gender lines; Mary or Clare of Assisi, rather than Francis, are often the role models presented to female readers. Perhaps our female reader, an obviously wealthy woman who sought to appropriate Francis' piety while remaining in the secular life, could identify with Francis' origins as a wealthy merchant, and his choice to embrace monastic virtues although living outside the bounds of traditional monasticism.

Recent studies by Neff (2020) and Derbes (2020) have elucidated how wealthy members of the laity –men and women– adapted innovative modes of religious practice first pioneered by members of religious orders.¹⁹ Thus, as we have seen in the case of MS 411, works of art were used in meaningful practices of devotion not only by friars and nuns but by ordinary citizens who were otherwise related to these orders. In the case of MS 411, the friar depicted might be a relative of the female reader, on whom he and his local friary perhaps relied on for donations while she relied upon him for spiritual guidance.

The choice of Francis as object of devotion here was also probably prompted by the devotee's relationship with the friar depicted with her in the manuscript; his presence in both the first and last image at suggests that the female reader's spiritual journey has been supervised and supported by a male authority figure. But she too may have participated in the process of personalization of the story of Francis' life for her; hints of her agency can be seen in the way she is seemingly personified as one of the virtues, and then gradually gains exceptionally close access to Francis himself.

The visual evidence suggests that despite her status as a layperson and a woman, she could appropriate divinely given, extraordinary charisma of her own via her devotional journey through this exceptional book. Although much

¹⁹ See, for example, Neff (2020) and Derbes (2020).



more can be said about MS 411, my study here has broader implications for the study of lay piety in late medieval Italy; its complex text and innovative imagery adds to the growing evidence that women, even laywomen, could engage on a highly sophisticated level with texts and works of art.

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alberzoni, M. P. (1997). *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo di storia francescana*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Armstrong, R, Hellmann, J. A. and Short, W. (2001). *Francis of Assisi The Founder: Early Documents*. New York: New City Press.
- Bollati, M. (2014). La *Legenda maior sancti Francisci* di Bonaventura, una lettura iconografica (Coord. Vittorio Emanuele). *Sémata: Ciências Sociais e Humanidades* (26), 725-737.
- Chatterjee, P. (2014). *The Living Icon in Byzantium and Italy: the Vita Image, Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Derbes, A. (2020). *Ritual, Gender and Narrative in Late Medieval Italy*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Easton, M. (2006). The Wound of Christ, the Mouth of Hell: Appropriations and Inversions of the Female Anatomy in the Later Middle Ages. In Susan L'Engle and Gerald Guest (Eds.), *Tributes to Jonathan J.G. Alexander: The Making and Meaning of Illuminated Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts* (pp. 395-414). Turnhout: Brepols.
- Flora, H. (2009). *The Devout Belief of the Imagination: The Meditationes Vitae Christi and Female Franciscan Spirituality in Trecento Italy*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Frugoni, Ch. (1995). La donna nelle immagini, la donna immaginata. In G. Duby and M. Perrot (Eds.), *Storia delle Donne in Occidente: il Medioevo*. Bari: Laterza.
- Frugoni, Ch. (2010). *Francesco e l'invenzione delle stimmate. Una storia per parole e immagini fino a Bonaventura e Giotto*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Frugoni, Ch. and Manzari, F. (2006). *Immagini di San Francesco in uno Speculum humanae salvationis del Trecento*. Roma, Biblioteca dell'Accademia nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana: Rome Editrici Francescane.



- Gustafson, E. (2018). Medieval Franciscan Architecture as Charismatic Space. In Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak and Martha Dana Rust (Eds.), *Faces of Charisma: Image, Text, Object in Byzantium and the Medieval West* (pp. 323-347). Koninklijke: Brill.
- Hand, J. M. (2013) *Women, Manuscripts and Identity in Northern Europe*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Jaeger, S. (2018). The Saint's Life as a Charismatic Form: Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi. In Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak and Martha Dana Rust (Eds.), *Faces of Charisma: Image, Text, Object in Byzantium and the Medieval West* (pp. 181-204). Koninklijke: Brill.
- Lewis, F. (1997). The Wound in Christ's Side and the Instruments of the Passion. In Lesley Smith and Jane Taylor (Eds.), *Women. And the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence* (pp. 204-229). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Manzari, F. (2004). Les livres d'heures en Italie: Réception et diffusion d'un livre d'origine septentrionale. *Gazette du livre médiéval* (45), 1-16.
- Manzari, M. (2010). Libri d'ore e strumenti per la devozione italiani e nordeuropei nel Tardo Medioevo: temi e aspetti della ricerca della catalogazione. In Silvia Maddalo and Michela Torquati (Eds.), *La catalogazione dei manoscritti miniati come strumento di conoscenza* (pp. 141-160). Roma: Istituto Storico Italiano Per Il Medioevo.
- Manzari, F. (2013). Italian Books of Hours and Prayer Books in the Fourteenth Century. In Sandra Hindman and James H. Marrow (Eds.), *Books of Hours Reconsidered* (pp. 153-209). London: Bripols Publishers.
- Manzari, F. (2014a). Funzione devozionale e notivà stilistiche in una *Legenda maior* del XIV secolo (Roma, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Vitt. Em. 411). *Sémata: Ciências Sociais e Humanidades* (26), 711-724.
- Manzari, F. (2014b). Migration de textes et d'images entre livres d'heures et livres de dévotion en Italie (xiii^e-xv^e siècles). In Christiane Raynaud and Michel Pastoureau (Eds.), *Des heures pour prier: les livres d'heures en Europe méridionale du Moyen Âge à la Renaissance* (pp. 269-299). Paris: Le léopard d'or.
- Manzari, F. (2014c). Pour une géographie de la production des livres d'heures en Italie au xiv^e siècle. État des études et nouvelles acquisitions. In Christiane Raynaud and Michel Pastoureau (Eds.), *Des heures pour prier: les*



- livres d'heures en Europe méridionale du Moyen Âge à la Renaissance* (pp. 21-41). Paris: Le léopard d'or.
- Mazzini, S. (2000). La Legenda Maior Figurata nel Ms. 411 Della Biblioteca Nazionale Di Roma. *Iconographia Franciscana*, 13. Rome: Istituto storico dei Cappuccini.
- Muzzioli, G. (1954). *Mostra Storica Nazionale della miniature, Catalogo*. Firenze: Sansoni.
- Neff, A. (2020). *Soul's Journey: Franciscan Art, Theology, and Devotion in the Supplicationes variae*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. (Ed. 2020). <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/charisma>
- Pryds, D. (2015). Lady Jacopa and Francis: Mysticism and The Management of Francis of Assisi's Deathbed Story. In Thomas Cattoi and Christopher Moreman (Eds.), *Death, Dying and Mysticism: The Ecstasy of the End* (pp. 15-34). Palgrave.
- Sand, A. (2014). *Vision, Devotion, and Self-Representation in Late Medieval Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Seubert, X. (2011). Isaiah's Servant, Christianity's Man of Sorrows, and St Francis of Assisi. In Catherine Pugliesi and William Barcham (Eds.), *Passion in Venice: Crivelli to Tintoretto and Veronese* (pp. 28-32). New York: Museum of Biblical Art.
- Smith, K. A. (2003). *Art, Identity and Devotion: Three Women and their Books of Hours*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Weber, M. (1947). *Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Trans. A. R. Henderson and Talcott Parsons). Edinburgh: Hodge.





Figure 1



Figure 2





Figure 3



Figure 4





Figure 5



Figure 6





Figure 7

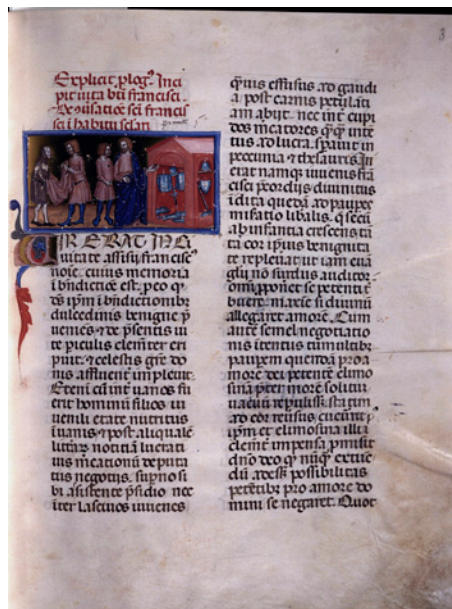


Figure 8



Figure 9

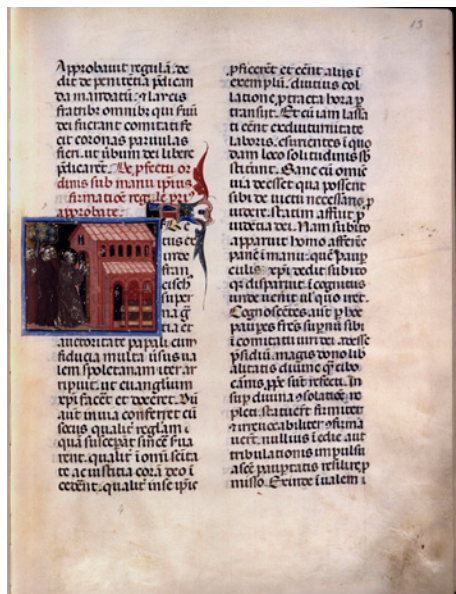


Figure 10



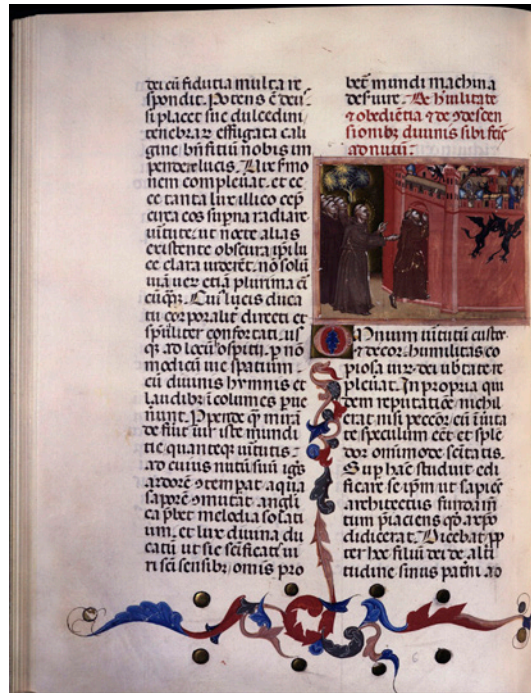


Figure 11



Figure 12

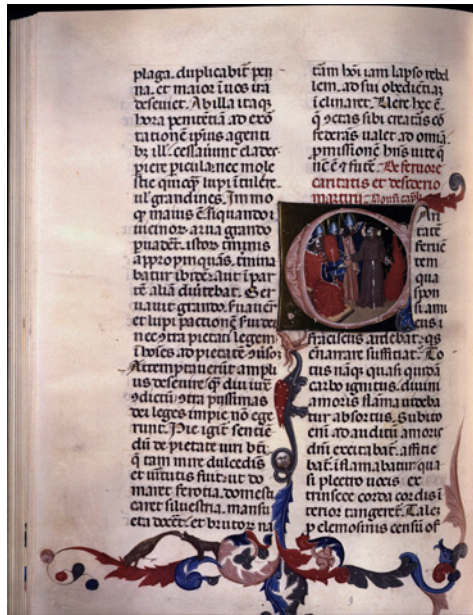


Figure 13

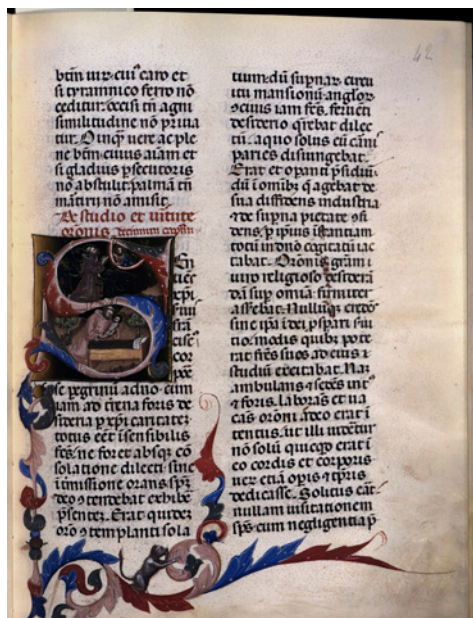


Figure 14



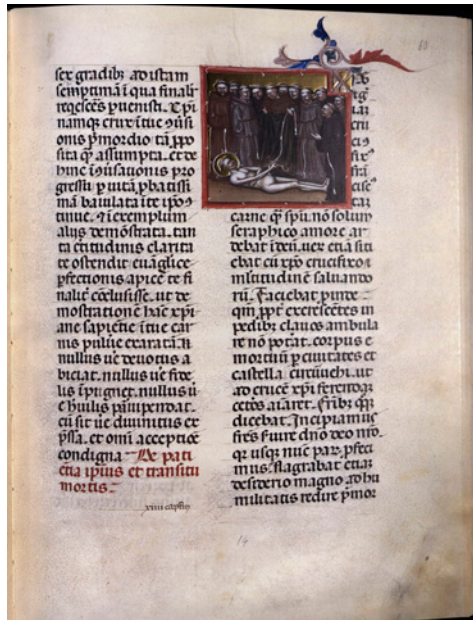


Figure 17

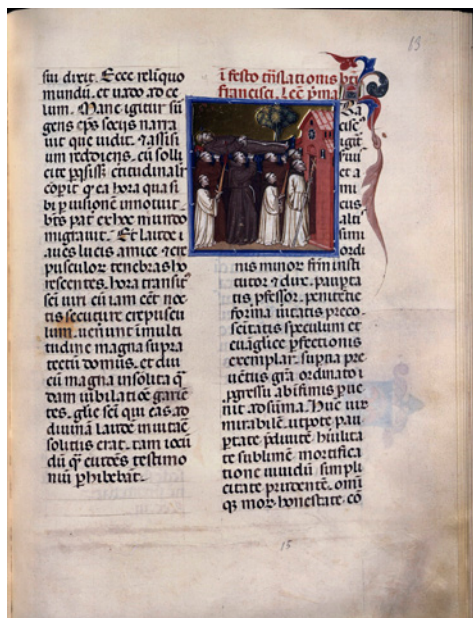


Figure 18

