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John M. Carvalho

Villanova University, john.carvalho@villanova.edu

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Annunciations - Figuring the Feminine in Renaissance Art

John M. Carvalho

Abstract

Viewers of Renaissance representations of the Annunciation miss an important irony. Where Mary is figured as unimpressed by Gabriel's proposal, she is upholding a masculinist ideal of female virtue. Where she is figured as delighted by the news, she represents an alternative feminine ideal that continues to be attractive to women and feminists, today. Inspired by the writings of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, I figure Mary in Renaissance representations of the Annunciation as contesting an ideal of feminine virtue that would deny her sexual difference and deny her pleasure in fulfilling her role as the bride and mother of God.

Key Words

Annunciation, feminine ideal, Renaissance, sexual difference

1. Introduction

Why has so little attention been paid to images of the Annunciation, to representations of the angel Gabriel announcing to the virgin of Nazareth that she will soon be big with God? Apart from two dissertations, written for departments of Theology and Fine Arts, no full length study has been devoted to these images in the past fifty years and no full length study ever has been published in English.^[1] What could explain this apparent lapse, and what does it mean for us, today?



Fig 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Annunciation* (detail), (1472-75), oil and tempera on wood, Uffizi, Florence.

Images of the Annunciation proliferated when Renaissance art was beginning to give narrative continuity to the Christian saga.^[2] These images, and the text they pictured, represented an important episode in the story of the Word made flesh, but the scene of Mary's special situation, only by extension a story

about the son of God, never proved as important or compelling for scholars as those episodes represented in scenes of the Nativity or Crucifixion. Moreover, as Michael Baxandall has shown, images of the Annunciation were primarily of interest to Renaissance women and girls who used them as aids in visualizing themselves as part of the Christian narrative.^[3] Thus, already in the Renaissance, the Annunciation to Mary had a marginal existence and limited importance.

How much less important must these images of a virgin confronted by an angel seem to us today? Even for scholars piqued by marginalia in the history of art, the ostensibly simple structure and transparent significance of these images do not seem to leave room for critical inquiry. Examinations of the symbolic elements of these images reveal scant material for analysis, and the fixed arrangement of these elements from image to image apparently leaves very little to discuss. Stylistically, images of the Annunciation appear to contribute more to our understanding of the artists who rendered them than to the scene they represent, and an analysis of the narrative elements of these Annunciations seems hardly more rewarding. Apart from the controversies of Christian dogma—the status of Mary's virginity, for example, or Mary's own conception without sin, or the exact manner of the conception of God's progeny—the scene is taken to be a quite straightforward rendering of the Gospel told by Luke (1:26-38). As a consequence, once the iconographic details have been sorted out,^[4] and the relation of Christian dogma to the scene in words and images is documented,^[5] there appears to be very little scholarly work to do with images of the Annunciation apart from chronicling the works and the lineages of the artists who produced them.^[6]

For a viewer skeptical of grand narratives and used to looking at its ostensive repetition for the details that make a difference,^[7] however, such iconographic, stylistic, and narratological analyses do not satisfy a sense that there is something more to these images. Why, such a viewer might ask, paint so many Annunciations? Between 1305, the date attributed to Giotto's fresco for the Arena Chapel in Padua, and 1512, the date assigned Andrea del Sarto's panel painted for the Monastery at San Gallo (now in the Pitti Palace in Florence), hundreds of Annunciations were executed, several dozen in large-scale frescos, panels, and altar pieces. Why paint so many apparently identical images of the same scene if the symbolic and narratological significance is so straightforward and static? In particular, why does Mary appear to be perfectly delighted in some of these Annunciations and positively saddened, even repulsed, in others?

Contemporary feminist scholarship points us toward answers to some of these questions. Barbara Newman identifies the converging concerns of rights-based and Wiccan feminism in the competing medieval requirements for a devout religious woman. On the one hand, through a vow of chastity as well as the profession of a monastic life, a devout woman could become man's equal, a virile woman. On the other hand, through a spotless virginity married to an erotic passion, a capacity for suffering and an ability to image a feminine Godhead, a devout woman could become superior to men, what Newman calls the "WomanChrist." We will find these competing claims reflected in

Italian Renaissance representations of the Annunciation. We will also find, in converging reflections on the virgin birth by Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, a basis for seeing in these Renaissance Annunciations a contested figure of the feminine that continues to be contested today.

2. From Virile Woman to WomanChrist

In part, no doubt, images of the Annunciation proliferated because of the construction of new churches, cathedrals, and private chapels; because of a proclivity for celebrating, through the religious images that decorated these places of worship, a life beyond the earthly restrictions of the flesh; because of the limited events in the life of Mary thought worthy of rendering into religious art; because, at the same time, of the central role the idea of Mary's virginity plays in the developing narrative of God's incarnation; because, of the economy of retelling in pictures stories some still could not read and others were better able to understand through the immediacy of visual images. What if, additionally, the uncanny repetition of all the essential features of these Annunciations reflected an unconscious difficulty in Renaissance culture? What if the repetition of the same image of the holiest woman in Christendom visited by a messenger from her divine Father was meant to respond to this difficulty?

In fact, the presence of the same difficulty has been argued for in a book about the Medieval and Renaissance debates over the rules governing the monastic life of women.^[8] According to Barbara Newman, the controversy is exhibited most prominently in the twelfth century correspondences between the castrated Benedictine abbot Abelard and his estranged spouse, Héloïse, then the abbess at Argenteuil. The same controversy influenced the orders for women given by Hildegard von Bingen, at one extreme, and the speculations about the superiority of the female sex by Cornelius Agrippa, at the other. The main question was whether the rules for the monastic life of men, especially those governing celibacy, should be applied without exception to women. Not surprisingly, Abelard argued for and Héloïse against such an isomorphism. While Abelard promoted chastity for women, Héloïse argued for the compatibility of spiritual and carnal love. What is so striking about this controversy, as Newman tells us, is the way the terms of this debate describe the differences that separate liberal feminists who would, today, by a revised bill of rights, make women the equivalent of men and "Wiccan" or eco-feminists who would, by reference to their specific sexual difference, define women as distinct from and superior to men. This same debate, so far invisible to students of the Annunciation, is made visible in the details of those apparently identical fifteenth- and sixteenth-century images of the Annunciation, primarily in the detailed renderings of Mary's face. The debate extends in our time not only to the differences between liberal and eco-feminists but to the more subtle differences in contemporary feminist theories about the specific sexual difference of women.^[9]

This analysis will demonstrate that the ideal of feminine virtue in the Renaissance was rather more contested than is usually believed. I want, however, to argue the stronger thesis, that what is at stake in the representation of Mary is her supposed allegiance to one or the other of these religious ideals and that these stakes are raised by the fact that every Renaissance

representation of the Annunciation (so the record shows) was executed by a man. Exactly why was it important for Renaissance men to represent Mary as a model for one or another ideal of feminine virtue in these images? Why were they unable to decide on one or the other ideal? Could these men, and the viewers of these Annunciations for four centuries after, have missed the irony that, when Mary is represented as unimpressed or even horrified by Gabriel's proposal, she is upholding a masculine ideal of female virtue, the "virile woman," and when she is depicted as pleased or delighted by the news, she represents what Newman calls the "WomanChrist," the model for an alternative spiritual feminism that is attracting considerable attention among women and feminists in our time?

I want to attempt three different comparisons, and I want to situate them against the backdrop of Newman's discussion of the standards of monastic life for women. The first comparison will be of three different painters from the fourteenth century, Giotto, Simone Martini, and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, who, as Prampolini tells us, illustrate the three main models for renderings of this subject.^[10] Next, I will compare three different Annunciations all painted by Fra Angelico between 1433 and 1445 that illustrate a subtler range of differences. Finally, I will compare three different painters from the fifteenth century, Piero della Francesca, Sandro Botticelli, and Alesso Baldovinetti, who reflect the same range of feelings in Mary's expression a century before but in a way that is heightened and significantly refined. Ultimately, I believe the evidence shows that in the fifteenth century the range of feeling attributed to Mary is notably expanded and that, from Lorenzo di Credi to Cosimo Tura to Antonello da Messina, Mary is made to express more and more the extremes available to a woman in her position. In a concluding section, I suggest that the *Annunciation* of Leonardo da Vinci represents an option for Mary that is not explored in renderings of her in other fourteenth and fifteenth century painting, an expression that supports an alternative identity that is not covered by the models Newman introduces.

3. Giotto, Martini, and Lorenzetti

When we now look at Renaissance images of the Annunciation in this light, we see the same range of affect in the expressions of Mary's response to Gabriel as is represented in the practices and writings of the medieval clerics. The *Annunciation* rendered for the [Arena Chapel](#) (1305) makes a distinctive contribution to the debate at the same time as it exhibits all of the simplicity, density, and humanity of Giotto's art. In this fresco, Giotto showed Gabriel and Mary occupying the central space of separate chambers given depth by the device of a curtain pulled aside to reveal them. The angel is kneeling, extending his right hand, holding a scroll in the other, and appears to be addressing Mary. Golden light radiates from his form. Mary genuflects, her arms crossed against her chest, a small book in her right hand, and – ever so slightly – she is smiling. The corners of her mouth are turned up just enough, her head is held straight, her gaze slightly averted in a gesture of contemplation or respect. From above and to the left, light streams toward her. The scene is imbued with Mary's acceptance and resolve.

Michael Baxandall would have us read this representation as signifying Mary's submission to Gabriel's news. In *Painting and*

Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy, Baxandall interprets the differences in the rendering of Mary's expression in these *Annunciations* as representing the different laudable qualities of the "Angelic Colloquy," one of three mysteries associated with this event.^[11] On this view, Mary is represented variously as in one of five different states: "disquiet" (*conturbatio*), "reflection" (*cogitatio*), "inquiry" (*interrogatio*), "submission" (*humiliatio*), or "merit" (*meritatio*). According to Baxandall, fifteenth-century people differentiated various stages of the Annunciation more sharply than twentieth-century viewers typically do.^[12] Drawing from the tradition of prayer books for young girls, like the *Zardino de Oration*, and on the practices of charismatic preachers like Fra Roberto Caracciolo, Baxandall emphasizes the important relation of devotional practices involving visualizing oneself as part of the events of the liturgy and the painted images of these same scenes in public and private places of worship. Following Baxandall, the differences I want to emphasize here would be more transparent to the audience for these images five hundred years ago.

Notwithstanding the extraordinary insight Baxandall brings to bear in his study, he still could not say why an artist chose to represent the Annunciation through one of these moments rather than another. Why, we might ask, do images of disquiet and submission dominate fifteenth-century representations of this scene?^[13] Why, as he says, are images of reflection and inquiry more discerning in the fourteenth century?^[14] Why does he not emphasize the nuanced images of submission in the *Annunciations* of Fra Angelico, for example? What would he do with images that don't obviously match any one of the five states of the colloquy? Baxandall shows how representations of the Annunciation can be interpreted within the socially-defined practices of making, seeing, and feeling in the fifteenth century.

I want to situate and interpret these same images in the context of seeing and becoming a devout woman in that period.

Following Newman, the range of expressions rendered in the image of Mary reflects a range of preferences for figuring the feminine on a scale running from the virile woman to the womanChrist, and the differences and variations in these representations reflect an instability in the way Renaissance culture perceived the ideal female that Mary represented.

Simone Martini's and Lippo Memmi's *Annunciation*, (1333) painted for the altar of the Siena Cathedral, gives Mary an expression that contrasts starkly with the image offered by Giotto and challenges the categories of the Angelic Colloquy. For this altarpiece, Martini places the angel, the vase of long-stemmed lilies, and the virgin on a solid gold background framed, at the top, by Gothic arches and, on the sides, by separate panels with images of saints. Images of small angels and a dove make a circle in the center arch. The angel is kneeling, wearing a curiously plaid cape, and holding an olive branch in his left hand.

Mary sits, holding a book in her left hand, marking the page she has been reading with her thumb, while her right hand pulls her mantle closed around her neck. The angel's demeanor is stern.

He points upward with his right hand, perhaps to the painted words that stretch between Mary and him, perhaps in a gesture of admonition. Mary is not at all pleased. She has in fact recoiled (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Simone Martini, *Annunciation* (detail), (1333), tempera and gold on panel, Uffizi, Florence. (Expand image [here](#).)

If it is in response to the words Gabriel has uttered (the otherwise nonthreatening "*Ave gratia plena dominus tecum*" engraved on the gold-leafed background), she seems much less disquieted, as Baxandall might say, than disturbed, as if she were shrinking in disgust from Gabriel's fully articulated plan.

Gabriel's severity would seem to respond to this resistance. In this Annunciation, Mary has no choice. The Father will not be denied. The Angelic Colloquy does not prepare us for such a fate. The image, painted for the Siena Cathedral, makes sense only if Martini sought to represent Mary as at pains to preserve her physical virginity, if he sought to represent woman, and this woman, as claiming no special relationship with God based on her sex.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti illustrates, according to Prampolini, the other fourteenth-century model for representations of the Annunciation. In a panel painted for the rectory of the [Church of Pinacoteca in Sienna](#) (1344), Lorenzetti represents a resplendent figure unabashedly open to her fate as the wife and mother of God. Mary is represented in radiant light with her eyes cast to heaven in what appears to be an ecstatic embrace of her future with God. She is seated in one half of a vaulted space shared with Gabriel. Her arms are crossed over her heart; a book is in her lap. Gabriel genuflects and gestures, oddly, over his shoulder to the divine presence represented as radiant light in the top left corner of the image. His message is spelled out in the space that connects him to the virgin. We find, here, nothing of the tension depicted in the Martini panel nor the practiced austerity of the Giotto. Angel and virgin are composed and share intimately the scene of this *Annunciation*. It is as if Lorenzetti has adapted the visage and regard of Saint Dorothy from his triptych, *Madonna and Child with Saints* (late 1330s),^[15] to express a variation on the submission represented by Giotto. Madonna and Child are the object of Saint Dorothy's reverent gaze. Here, the inspired awe connecting Mary and her divine Father anticipates the virgin's *meritatio*, the

moment of the Angelic Colloquy that, Baxandall writes, “followed after the departure of Gabriel and belongs with representations of the virgin on her own, the type now called *Annunziata*.”^[16] Still, it is tempting to see in Lorenzetti’s image the worthiness of Mary to bear the enormous responsibilities outlined by Gabriel and Mary’s *amor fati*, her love of this fate. The expression of this virgin is full of anticipation and empty of dread, the polar opposite of the Martini and a more ecstatic rendering of Mary’s submission than is found in other fourteenth century images of the Annunciation. Lorenzetti, however unconsciously, seems to have found his way to an identification of Mary with an ideal of femininity Héloïse would have appreciated and Abelard decried.

4. Fra Angelico

In the later part of the fifteenth century, images that emphasized the womanChrist ideal and Mary’s love of her fate became more common, but in the early and middle parts of the fifteenth century, a range of more reserved forms of submission, *humiliatio*, prevailed. The case of Fra Angelico is telling. In just over ten years, he and artists in his school executed several *Annunciations*. I examine three that exhibit the nuances of expression available to a single artist working within the parameters of a single moment of the Angelic Colloquy. These are especially worth considering because Angelico was a monk and, working with assistants who were also monks, he produced *Annunciations* for a variety of religious settings, including the cloistered quarters of monastic men.

The panel painted for the altar of the Church of Gesú in Cortona, Spain (1433-34), and now at the Museo Diocesano (also in Cortona) shows Gabriel and Mary in the customary poses. The angel is standing and leaning forward on his left leg. Mary sits, the book at her side, arms crossed on her chest (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Fra Angelico, *Annunciation* (central panel), (1433-34), tempera on wood, Museo Diocesano, Cortona. (Expand image [here](#).)

The scene is an outdoor portico fitted with Corinthian columns bordering, on the outside, the closed garden of Mary's virginity and opening, on the inside, onto Mary's bedchamber, the *thalamis virginis*. God is fitted into a cartouche above the central column. An illumined dove hovers over Mary's head. In the deep background, at the top left of the painting, the scene of Adam's and Eve's expulsion from Eden links Mary to their original sin and especially to Eve's deviation from God's directive for which Mary's submission to God's new plan is supposed to compensate. At the same time, by comparison with an *Annunciation* produced in 1435 for the [Convent of San Domenico](#) in Fiesole (and now in a gallery of the Museo Prado, Madrid), the mood of the image is tender. The angel points to Mary with his right hand and toward the heavens with his left. The artist has painted the words detailing Gabriel's explanation and Mary's response in the space that divides the figures. Mary's acceptance is represented in her direct engagement with Gabriel and a serene visage. This submission is a form of acceptance.

By contrast, the fresco painted for the head of the staircase in the [Convent of San Marco](#) at Florence (1437-46) is much more somber. Here we have only Mary, the angel, the fenced-in garden, and the empty bed chamber protected by a barred window. Gabriel stands with his arms crossed, his head bowed.

Mary, sitting without her book, does the same, her mouth turned down; her eyes are sad. Across the front edge of the raised, stone slab of the portico, Fra Angelico has inscribed the admonition, "As you venerate, while passing before it, this figure of the intact virgin, beware lest you omit to say a Hail Mary."

The premium of preserving her inviolate body is represented in Mary's reluctant submission to God's plan. Her reluctance connects Mary with the tradition of the virile woman who is man's equal by virtue of rejecting the concupiscence of the flesh.

She wears her virginity as the proof that her sexual difference has not won her privileged audiences with God. Unlike the Cortona Madonna who, framed by a radiant halo, submits with interest to the power of the Most High, the Madonna at San Marco, whose halo is an eclipsed sphere, guards her womb from the violation of her sexual indifference.

Finally, for [an individual monk's cell](#) at the same Convent of San Marco, Fra Angelico's studio has rendered an *Annunciation* stripped to the bare essentials. The setting, more cloister than portico, lacks any ornamentation. The angel, notably, stands and appears to be instructing Mary who, kneeling on a small wooden bench with her hands folded in prayer, bears a most vacant look. Perhaps this is the work of a lesser hand than the master. Perhaps its artificial austerity is meant to inspire the meditative reveries of the cell's inhabitant. At the very least, it shows an extreme rendering of *humiliatio*, and situates these extremes in the private living quarters of a cleric. It might be the devotee who occupied these quarters who is represented in the left background observing the virgin receiving her instructions. There is no way to be certain, but evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems probable that the inspiration to represent so desexualized an image of Mary for the private cell of a devout man derives from an interest in reinforcing a virile model for devout women.

In general, what the *Annunciations* by Fra Angelico show is the range of affections that can be represented in the single moment

of submission and how the options in that range can be deployed to suit, more or less, the beliefs and practices of the audience for each of those images. In the Cortona *Annunciation*, painted for a church in Spain, in which Mary is given more liberty in the submission to her fate, the audience would have included men and women, younger and older, upper, middle, and lower class individuals. Mary's willing acceptance better matches the different levels of devotion that would have been represented by this wider audience. It also represents a wider acceptance of sexual difference in the subjectivation of fifteenth century European women. Mary's sexual difference is secured by the comparison with Eve, the mother of a race bound by earthly mortality. With the *Annunciation*, Mary's sexual difference is made the medium for returning divinity to the earthly realm, and for this she is most revered by the faithful. In the public and private quarters of the Monastery of San Marco, however, the image of Mary's spiritual virginity is replaced with images of the *virginitas intacta*. As "embodied angel," Gabriel's mirror image, Mary represents an ideal that does not exclude men but, rather, is defined by the devotional practices of men. In these images, the significance of Mary's sexual difference is erased.

5. Piero, Botticelli, Baldovinetti

As noted above, in the latter part of the fifteenth century, images that tended to heighten Mary's sexual difference and the love of her fate became more common. The famous *Annunciation of Piero della Francesca* would seem to be an important exception.

This is a complex image, part of the vast "Legend of the True Cross," a fresco cycle for the chancel of San Francesco in Arezzo (1452-57). The image is divided into four quadrants. God, in the upper left corner, extends his hands as if to send the Holy Spirit. Gabriel, genuflecting in the lower left square, raises his right hand in greeting and holds what some say is a mirror in his left. Mary stands in the lower right section, framed by a column and the entablature of a portico. She turns to greet the angel, right hand raised, left hand clutching her book. Her eyes and mouth are turned down; her expression is dour. Baxandall suggests that Piero here revived the fourteenth century representations of Mary's inquiry or reflection.^[17] If this is so, the *interagatio* would appear more on the order of "How can this be?" than "How will this happen?" and the *cogitatio* seems more closely associated with the Virgin's disquiet than with the deliberative "casting about in her mind" (*dielogizein*) for whatever Gabriel may mean. Granting that Piero may have represented several moments of this scene at once—God loosing the Holy spirit, Gabriel explaining this loosing and the overshadowing of the virgin by the power of the Most High, Mary recoiling in disquieted inquiry and reflection—what he has not represented is submission, even as God's presence indicates the inevitability of that moment.

It seems reasonable to suggest, on the one hand, that Mary is represented here as less than enthusiastic about her divine fate because she is represented as protecting her otherwise physically inviolate body at all costs. It may be better to say, on the other hand, that Mary is made to stand in, here, for the ideal fifteenth century woman as she was perceived by an art world of painters, patrons, spectators, and priests who were all seriously invested in a particular representation of that ideal but also seriously divided about it. In Piero's *Annunciation*, Mary's questions about

becoming, at once, the wife and mother of God are rendered moot in the representation of her sealed fate. Any questions Mary might have had are answered in the reflection she sees in the mirror Gabriel holds of the great, eight-paneled door behind him that symbolizes both the *porta clausa* of Mary's virginity and the cross, both the gate and the straight path to the salvation won by the cross, the cross of the legend iterated in the cruciform scheme of Piero's image of the Annunciation.

On this reading, Mary's apparent sadness can be read as knowledge of the dreaded destiny that awaits the "fruit of her womb," thus revealing Mary's resistance to the violation of her virginity as a connection to the protection of her first born.^[18] Since there is no evidence from the Gospel that Mary was so informed, there is good reason to conclude that this wisdom fell to representations of Mary in the fifteenth century as a way of complicating her resistance to her fate and as a way of contesting images of her embracing this fate. Even as images of an ecstatic virgin become more regular in fifteenth and sixteenth century Renaissance painting, there is in Piero's *Annunciation* a resistance to the special quality a woman's sexual difference can make and the special power that sexual difference can afford her in plying the folds of the human world onto the divine realm.

Sandro Botticelli's *Annunciation* (1489-90), in a panel painted for the Church of Santa Maria Maddelena de' Pazzi (formerly known as the Florentine monastery Cestello), presents another example of this contested representation of Mary and of this figuring of an identity suitable for women in the Renaissance (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Sandro Botticelli, *The Annunciation* (1489-90), tempera on panel, Uffizi, Florence. (Expand image [here.](#))

The interior of a salon with a door opening onto a garden and the city beyond it provides the unusual Italian setting for the

angel, on one knee with long-stemmed lilies in his left hand, entreating the virgin who, standing at a lectern, swoons at the news. Both of Mary's hands are thrown up, her body strikes a sinuous curve, her eyes are closed and her face wears the look of a body given over to the inevitable. Baxandall attributes to Botticelli "a dangerous affinity with *conturbatio* and suggests that other painters working at the end of the fifteenth century "were experimenting particularly with more complex and restrained types of *conturbatio*" than can be found in this *Annunciation*.^[19] Baxandall quotes Leonardo (without citation) as saying:

... some days ago I saw the picture of an angel who, in making the Annunciation, seemed to be trying to chase Mary out of her room, with movements showing the sort of attack one might make on some hated enemy; and Mary, as if desperate, seemed to be trying to throw herself out of the window.^[20]

Obviously, this is not at all a description of Botticelli's *Annunciation*, which may be a commentary on Leonardo, on Baxandall, or on both. Assuming it is an account of the panel painted for the chapel of the Cestello monastery, what does it tell us? Baxandall concluded, "Fifteenth century pictorial development happened within fifteenth century classes of emotional experience."^[21] In other words, Baxandall would have us suppose, Mary's exaggerated affect here represents something of the range of real emotional responses exhibited by women from that period. We can do better than that. Ostensibly, the *conturbatio* would describe the scene in the fourth verse of the first chapter of Luke, "And startled by the words (*hē de epi tō logō dietarachthē*), still she reflected about whatever this greeting might be." Is this what Botticelli's image represents?

As narrated by Luke, Gabriel has just appeared and Mary is, naturally, startled. In Botticelli's image the angel entreats the virgin; as if he had already made an appearance and, in a variation on the biblical story, is attempting to persuade her to accept the terms of God's plan, not so much chasing Mary as pleading with her. In the earliest representations of the Annunciation (from the medieval period), based on the Apocrypha, Gabriel did pursue Mary. He first confronted her at the well and then followed her into the house. This version, while supporting Leonardo's perception that the angel is chasing Mary, suggests a different characterization of Mary's disquiet.

She is not just startled by the appearance of a semi-divine being but is responding with reserve to its implications for her. If Piero's Mary could see the truth of the cross in a mirror-reflected symbol of her inviolate body, why should Botticelli's Mary not know why Gabriel is there? Is this merely an image of disquiet, as Baxandall suggests, or an image of deferred submission, a "No" that with closed eyes and an inviting sinuous form says, as her fate requires, "Yes"? Such an interpretation, while opposed to the kind of message we want to send women and girls today, would fit the conventions and convictions of the fifteenth century Italian patriarchy. It shows Mary bending to obey the Law of her spiritual Father, and it complicates the importance of Mary's sexual difference. It portrays an image that might inspire a woman or young girl to devote her sexual difference to bridging

the human and divine realms through a religious life.

This inspiration was increasingly encouraged in representations that make up the balance of late fifteenth century images of the Annunciation. For the most part, these images represent bourgeois women in their late teens or early twenties as openly receptive to angels in the privacy of enclosed porches and rooms opened to the outside. Indeed, Alesso Baldovinetti, Antonello da Messina, Cosimo Tura, Lorenzo di Credi, and others painted Annunciations featuring the clearly delighted response of Mary to Gabriel's message. These images complicate the distinctions spelled out in the Angelic Colloquy at the same time as they make the image of Mary a more literal representation of the women of this period. The latter development likely has to do with advances in pictorial technique as well as with the pragmatics of the patronage system. Artists were both better able and more motivated to close the gap between real Renaissance women and their spiritual ideal. They did this, however, without straying from the formulaic settings of these Annunciations: angel on the left, virgin on the right, signed with the virgin's epithets and elaborated with symbols of the virgin's purity and availability. What is different in late fifteenth century Annunciations is the diminished presence of the divine Father and, more importantly, the infrequent references to the *porta clausa*, the closed gate representing Mary's virginity.

The moments of the Angelic Colloquy represented in these images tend toward *conturbatio* and *humiliatio* but, as mentioned above, are somewhat more complicated than that. The "disquiet" shows nothing of disturbance or surprise but, as in the *Annunciation* of Lorenzo di Credi (1475), rather the gesture of a patrician woman interrupted unexpectedly by someone she has no reason to fear. The "submission" shows less resignation and humility than, in the fantastic *Annunciation* of Cosimo Tura (1469), fantastic because set in a vaulted archway opened onto an unenclosed landscape and cluttered with animals, fruit, and images of naked men and women, the self-satisfaction of the virgin realizing Isaiah's prophecy in her womb. In the *Annunciation* of Antonello da Messina (1474-5), Mary's ostensive *humiliatio* approaches the moment of merit in the knowing smile and demurred countenance of a woman who is secretly pleased with herself.

Such nuances are rendered most subtly in Alesso Baldovinetti's *Annunciations*, one in a panel painted (before 1460) for the [Church of San Giorgio alla Costa](#) and the other (1466-7) in fresco and panel painted for the chapel of the [Cardinal of Portugal](#), both in Florence.^[22] In both, the angel's arms are crossed. In the 1460 panel, Gabriel appears as if he has just arrived. In the later image, perhaps owing to the medium (the part of the image containing Mary and Gabriel is done in fresco), the angel's position is more set. In both, Mary lifts her right hand in a gesture of surprise and receptivity and her expression telescopes to the extent it signals, in her upturned hand, disquiet (*conturbatio*), in her sideways glance, reflection and interrogation (*cogitatio* and *interrogatio*) and in her reassured countenance, an acceptance of her fate (*humiliatio*). It is as if Mary knows the whole story. Notably, in contrast to Piero's representation of the same knowledge, the virgin is not saddened but pleased by what she realizes at this moment, released to the fate pronounced for her by God's messenger.^[23] What this shows is a shift away

from an ideal of femininity proved by protection of the inviolate body toward a guarded acceptance of the power of sexual difference to bridge the gap between the human and divine realms. That this shift is never complete, that we can find images of the virile woman into the sixteenth century and beyond ([Henry Ossawa Tanner's *Annunciation*](#) (1898), for example), demonstrates that this formation of an ideal for women in the Renaissance was contested and remains contested into the present. Barbara Newman thinks this division is reflected in the differences between contemporary liberal and Wiccan feminists, between those feminists who demand equal rights and privileges in the company of men and those who seek the company of women and cultivate a special relation of women to the earth from which they draw powers that can advance the position of women alone. While these agendas continue to figure prominently in contemporary feminism, there is also an extant strain of feminist theory not considered by Newman. The work of these feminists can help us flesh out the figure of the feminine in Renaissance art in a way that is especially relevant for men and women today.

6. Stabat Mater, the Sensible Transcendental and Leonardo

The French theorists Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, for example, have extended feminist philosophy beyond the difference between the liberal and Wiccan models emphasized by Newman. Kristeva emphasizes, among other things, the symbolism of maternity and the semiotics of woman. She argues, from a position informed by the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, that in the popular and cultured imagination, maternity is confined to the order of the signified, the Law of the Symbolic Father, while woman resides in the uncertain and indeterminate articulation of what is unnamable, improbably heterogeneous and anterior to all meaning and paternity. Irigaray draws attention to, among other things, the fluidity of women's bodies as well as to the differential immediacy of an intra-uterine experience that connects woman to the divine and defies the restricted economy of phallogocentric exchange. Both Kristeva and Irigaray have written about the experience of maternity in connection with the Virgin Mary but not in connection with images of the Annunciation.[\[24\]](#)

According to Kristeva, the "fantasy" of motherhood and the symbolic value of maternity is nowhere more deeply entrenched than in the image of the virgin mother.[\[25\]](#) This is not an image of the "archaic mother" whom we might reasonably revere but the idealization of a relationship to the mother that cannot be localized but which serves, rather, to mask the generalized symptomatology of a primary narcissism at the base of our hom(m)osocial culture.[\[26\]](#) In the image of Mary, on her account, the symbolic order attempts to reconcile trace elements of matrilineal social relations sustained in the patriarchal Law with a representation of nature as the untapped (virgin) resource for a new society based on production and limited exchange in an economy of scarcity.[\[27\]](#) Mary's virginity deprives her of any physical relation with her body and of any physical relation with men, as well. As the mother of God, Mary sacrifices the bond with her own mother, thereby simulating the matricide that connects young boys with the culture of men. Either way, in her condition, Mary is committed to the symbolic order and the Law of the Father, in her case, literally, God the Father. For Kristeva,

this double-bind can be resolved in the poetics or semiotics of *jouissance*, of a pleasure that is specific to a woman's sexual difference but exceeds it: sexual, spiritual, physical, and conceptual all at once. Lacan himself speaks of an Other *jouissance* specific to the sexuation of the feminine.[28]

Irigaray speaks of woman as the "sensible transcendental," a being in between humanity and divinity and the privileged medium, by virtue of her sexual difference, for bringing the divine back into the sublunary realm. Irigaray indicts the masculinist assumptions of Christian orthodoxy and attempts to reinsert the privilege of what she calls "(a)woman" into the economy that connects God and men. If Mary's "yes" to Gabriel is a "no" to her own life, her generation, her flowering,[29] it also reinserts woman into the Christian narrative, according to which God created man and woman, by providing the flesh in which God himself is incarnated.[30] It is precisely by a sensitivity attending to her virginity that Mary opens up to "the most delicate vibration," conceiving the Law as flesh "in the body of a woman, guardian of the spirit of the divine life." [31] It is by a certain love and female tenderness (*philotes*), Irigaray writes, that woman sublimates the male instinct to discover God in the chaotic ecstasy of a disembodied sex.[32] For such women, on Irigaray's account, maternity "renews their ties to their mothers and other women," [33] but this will happen only if the sexual difference of women is not defined by its difference from men but as a "real identity, a natural and spiritual one." [34]

Perhaps something of this sort is approached in the *Annunciation* rendered by Leonardo da Vinci in the late 1470s (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Leonardo da Vinci, *Annunciation* (1472-75), oil and tempera on wood, Uffizi, Florence. (Expand image [here.](#))

The image, painted for the monastery on Monte Oliveto near Florence (now in the Uffizi), is rendered on a panel more than seven-feet long and more than three-feet high. In it, Leonardo incorporates many of the distinct accomplishments of his later works. There is the customary *sfumato*, a palpable atmosphere that connects our gaze to the objects and figures in the painting, as well as the scientific accuracy in his rendering of the local flora and fauna (flowers in the garden where Gabriel alights, topiary trees indigenous to Monte Oliveto in the painting's middle ground, the angel's wings represented as if suited for flight and not as adornments of a semi-divine being). There is, in addition, the skilled handling of the drapery in Mary's garment and, finally, the stillness and grace of the figures themselves. Mary is seated in an uncovered portico opening onto a garden framed by a low

wall, on one side, and onto an interior room on the other. She is reading from a book propped on an ornate lectern set in the garden. Her right hand marks the spot where she has been reading. Her left hand is raised in greeting. The angel genuflects in front of her, holding lilies in his left hand and gesturing with his right. The garden is not closed but, through a passage cut through the wall framing it, opened onto a view of tall, sculpted tress and, in the long distance, onto a sight of the Italian Alps and a seaport with towers and ships.

The angel and virgin encounter one another as apparent equals. It is as if both know well the significance of this event. Leonardo has given Mary's face an expression of deliberation with no indication of "casting about in her mind for whatever the words may mean" (see Fig. 1 above). She is not at all startled nor has she demurred. Rather than telescoping the distinct moments of the colloquy, it is as if Leonardo has extracted them, leaving us with the principals themselves. Mary's expression is of a woman absorbing the full import of what has been communicated to her. The depth of her reflection is reinforced by the weight of the figure Leonardo has rendered, a nearly life-sized image of a mature woman seated on a large chair set in a corner of a portico created by the converging orthogonal lines of the stones supporting the wall of the house behind her. Mary's face, molded by variations of light falling on its contours, is perfectly serene, not pulled forward in anticipation nor back in fear. She has not yet accepted Gabriel's offer. She has not committed herself. Gabriel's expression, eyes turned up as if waiting for an answer he has not taken for granted, reinforces this impression.

If, as Irigaray suggests, her sexual difference is the human bridge across which the divine will return to earth, Mary appears aware of it here, asking God's messenger for an adequate account of how bearing her spiritual Father's child would put her on equal footing with men. Accepting the consequences Gabriel's message has for her, however, would deny her the pleasure, the *jouissance*, that would be a sign of her special alterity, a sign of her refusal to conform to a masculinist economy of desire, and a sign of her radical identification with God himself. Following Irigaray more closely, Mary's sexual difference is precisely the medium that allows her to know her fate and to love it, both profoundly and carnally. If Mary's identity emerges out of her difference and her knowledge of this difference, it may be possible to credit Leonardo with capturing in his *Annunciation* the ideal of this identity in difference in a figure of the feminine in Renaissance art that can be assayed by devout women of that era. Leonardo's image of the *Annunciation* invites us to consider a subtle thought that improves on Newman's interpretation of the open garden, the angel's grace, and Mary's face that compose this work. By drawing together images of divinity, humanity, carnality, and nature, Leonardo comments on a long tradition of representing this scene as the site of Mary's devotion and of the contested figure of devotion for women in the Renaissance. The work of Kristeva and Irigaray shows just how much that figure of the feminine is still contested, and must be contested, today. [35]

John Carvalho is a professor of philosophy who writes about the arts and aesthetics.

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Endnotes

[1] Jose Ignatio Badeness, "From Eyesight to Insight: The Annunciation in Renaissance Arts," dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, University of California, 1993; Don Denny, *The Annunciation from the Right: From Early Christian Times to the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977) originally presented as a dissertation, Department of Fine Arts, New York University, 1965.

[2] See Julia Kristeva, "Giotto's Joy," in *Desire in Language*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 211-16.

[3] See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 40-56.

[4] See David M. Robb, "The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *The Art Bulletin*, 18, 4 (December, 1936), 480-526.

[5] See Fernand Cabrol, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1924), vol. 1, 2, pp. 2241-67.

[6] See Giacomo Prampolini, *L'Annunciazione nei pittori primitivi italiani* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1939).

[7] See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen Press, 1987).

[8] Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

[9] It will take a distinctive method to add significantly to a study of these images, something of the sort that Michel Foucault has called "archaeology," a diagnosis of "the rules of formation ... never formalized in their own right ... found in widely differing theories, concepts and objects" that govern the form and content of these fourteenth and fifteenth century Annunciations (Michel Foucault, "Forward to the English Edition," *The Order of Things*, p. xi.). Foucault says this method "organizes" the subject in question, "divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations." This is the same method that led Foucault to uncover, famously, the representation of representation in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. Here, it will work to show how the iconographic and narratological rigidity of Renaissance images of the Annunciation reveal, in the details they alert us to, Mary's conflicted allegiance to the two competing ideals for devout women in the Renaissance: the androgynous model supported by Abelard,

what Newman calls the "virile woman," and the model of spiritual sexuality championed by Héloïse, what Newman calls the "womanChrist." In particular, we will see that Mary is represented sometimes as saddened and other times as delighted by the news Gabriel brings because she is revealing a preference for one or the other of these figures of the feminine in Renaissance life.

[10] Prampolini, p. 37.

[11] Baxandall, pp. 50-1. The other mysteries are the "Angelic Mission," and the "Angelic Salutation." Baxandall cites, and quotes at length from a sermon by Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce, one of those preachers Baxandall says were *repetiteur* with the painters of religious scenes in the period. Each of the mysteries is partitioned into five main parts (Baxandall, pp. 49-50).

[12] Baxabdall, p. 36.

[13] Baxandall, p. 55.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] A panel painted for the Siena convent of Santa Petronilla. See Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979), p. 1116 and fig. 117.

[16] Baxandall, p. 55.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] According to Kristeva ("Stabat Mater," in *Desire in Language, op. cit.*, pp. 250-1), this sadness is better assigned to Mary's necessarily unfulfilled desire "to experience within her own body the death of a human being, which her feminine fate of being the source of life spares her." What saddens the virgin is the knowledge that she will be denied the company of men and condemned to a sexuality of the Spirit.

[19] Baxandall, p. 55.

[20] Baxandall, p. 56.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] In Hartt's account (p. 313), the model for the San Giorgio *Annunciation* and, ostensibly, for the panel in 1460 is the same one who posed for Baldovinetti's *Madonna and Child* (1460). This presents the interesting situation of a model rendered as a patrician woman standing in for the Virgin Mary. Thus, a real woman who, because of her vocation, can never accomplish the ideal of "woman," is represented as a woman capable of standing in for that same ideal. The relation of the model to the patrician woman she represents is, then, the same as the relation of that representation of a patrician woman to the ideal she will never accomplish. It is part of the argument in this essay that woman's sexual difference is the bridge for crossing this divide between the real and the ideal.

[23] Of course the more God's presence is reflected in Gabriel's postures and pronouncements, the more this scene becomes saturated with the aesthetics of courtly love. Since Mary is

betrothed to Joseph prior to the Annunciation, Gabriel, God's second, gives testimony of the secret and chivalrous acts her divine Suitor plans.

[24] For Julia Kristeva see, *Black Sun*, trans.; Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University press, 1989); "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" in *Desire in Language*, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-270; *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); and "Stabat Mater," *op. cit. Desire in Language*. For Luce Irigaray see, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian Gill (New York: Columbia University press, 1985), pp. 55-72; "The Forgotten Mystery of Female Ancestry," in *Thinking the Difference*, trans. Karin Montin (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 89-112; "Religious and Civil Myths," in *je, tous, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 23-28; "Sexual Difference as Universal," in *I Love to You*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 43-48; "Sorcerer's Love," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); "When the Gods are Born," *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, *op. cit.*. See, also, Kelly Oliver, "The Politics of Interpretation: The Case of Bergman's *Persona*," in *Philosophy and Film*, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[25] Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 236.

[26] Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 234-6.

[27] Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 259.

[28] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore 1972-1973, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), especially 73-89.

[29] Irigaray, "When the Gods are Born," p. 167.

[30] Irigaray, "When the Gods are Born," p. 176.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Irigaray, "The Forgotten Mystery," p. 95.

[33] Irigaray, "The Forgotten Mystery," p. 99.

[34] Irigaray, "Sexual Difference as Universal," p. 48.

[35] See Suzanne Barnard, "Tongues of Angels: Feminine Structure and the Other *Jouissance*," in *Reading Seminar XX*, ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), pp. 171-85, for a clear account of the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the figure of the feminine and *jouissance* that is the background for the feminist theories of Kristeva and Irigaray.

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