

TADPOLES, CATERPILLARS, AND MERMAIDS: PIERO DI COSIMO'S POETIC NATURE

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Giorgio Vasari's biography of the Florentine painter Piero di Cosimo (1462–1522) has left an indelible mark on art-historical scholarship. Who can resist the image of an artist obsessed with fashioning himself as a melancholic genius, an artist who in his old age led a life of solitude, let his garden run wild, barely looked after his own appearance, and restricted his diet to such a degree that he ate only hard-boiled eggs, sometimes fifty in a row?¹ Whether one agrees with Vasari's presentation of an individual whose way of life was "more bestial than human [*più tosto bestiale che umano*]," nearly every subsequent publication on Piero since Vasari's of 1568 has attempted to reconcile the relationship between the artist's historical (or biographical) identity and his works of art.² One characteristic that emerges from Vasari's writings is Piero's affinity with nature, most notably in the following statement: "In all that there is said to be by his hand, one recognizes a spirit very different and far distant from that of other painters, and a certain subtlety in the investigation of some of the deepest and most subtle secrets of nature [*certe sottigliezze della natura che penetrano*]."³ While modern scholarship has tended to focus on Piero's secular paintings — namely, his *spalliera* panels featuring ancient fable and primitive man — his religious works likewise occasion reflection on the associated themes of primordial nature and the questions of origins, divine and earthly creation, and artifice and inventiveness.

¹ Vasari-Bettarini/Barocchi, *Le vite*, 4:59–71.

² For recent assessments of Piero's life and career based on new archival documentation, see Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*; idem, "The Birth Date, Early Life, and Career of Piero di Cosimo," and Waldman, "Fact, Fiction, Hearsay." For other recent studies, see Franklin, *Painting in Renaissance Florence*, 41–61; Tarugi, "Le bizzarrie pittoriche di Piero di Cosimo," 319–340; Barolsky, *The Faun in the Garden*, 87, 94; Barriault, "Piero di Cosimo"; Tempesti/Capretti, *Piero di Cosimo*; and Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*.

³ Vasari-Bettarini/Barocchi, *Le vite*, 4:69; translation adapted from Vasari-De Vere, *Lives*, 1:657.

Piero's *Adoration of the Child*, now in the Toledo Museum of Art, provides an excellent case study to investigate the relationship between the wonders of natural and divine generation in his art (Fig. 6.1). The panel painting boldly demonstrates Piero's rarified style with its rich palette, monumental portrayal of the body, and abundant natural details so minutely rendered.⁴ What comes to the fore is how carefully structured the composition is, especially when viewing the typological and generic correspondences among the figures and the flora and fauna. The sleeping Christ Child is mirrored by Joseph asleep in the background, while the purling spring below the infant relates to the refreshing waters providing drink for the donkey. In fact, the painting is filled with details that, on their own, seem innocent or anecdotal, but in the larger scheme challenge viewers to search for choreographed conjunctions and thematic relationships. The composition reveals an artist more inclined to make distinctions than to generalize, to employ strategic binary pairings in an effort to engage the viewer more profoundly. Nowhere is this process more evident than with the most unexpected and unprecedented detail: the tadpoles that populate the stream below the infant Christ (Fig. 6.2). Rare if not unique in paintings of the period, tadpoles are one of nature's wonders on account of their ability to mutate into frogs, and in this work they introduce questions regarding mysteries of transformation and nonsexual generation, specifically their own bodily metamorphosis as compared with the Incarnation of Christ (or the Word made flesh). Piero was active in an age when new attitudes were emerging about the benefits of inquiry into nature's secrets, with a view of nature as a generative, life-giving force (*natura naturans*), a creative artificer that fuels the artistic imagination.⁵ Classical texts, including Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and Lucretius's *On the Nature of*

⁴ The circular panel comprises six edge-glued poplar planks. The cleaning and surface conservation, performed by Mark Tucker (conservation report 21 May 1995; treatment record 12 January 1996; see document file, Toledo Museum of Art, 1937.1), reveals that the artist's paint mixtures were rich and rather viscous and built up in many layers. One can detect fingerprints in the clouds above the Virgin's head, where the artist blended the forms out with his fingertips. Piero also used lavish amounts of ultramarine blue for the robe of the Virgin. Traces of mordant-gilt halos are still visible on the Virgin and Child. In addition, the Virgin's veil, cuffs and neckline and the hem of her robe and mantle originally had mordant-gilded embellishments as well. The painting on the whole remains in relatively good condition, but in its original finished state it would have appeared more opulent. See further Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 167; 325 n. 17.

⁵ See Białostocki, "The Renaissance Concept of Nature and Antiquity," 64–68.

Things, were widely read and had received copious commentaries by the early sixteenth century. In Florence, these texts permeated the literary and artistic culture of Piero's contemporaries, from the writings of Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494) to the paintings of Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510).⁶

Rather than being isolated products of a self-indulgent mind, as is often presumed, the tadpoles in Piero's work are more poetic in form: they encourage a process of discovery and invite broader interrogations on the principles of natural, divine, and artistic generation. According to Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans (1:19–20), God makes himself known in all creation, providing no excuse for denying his eternal power. It follows that Piero's depiction of nature's curiosities serves in part to elucidate the invisible nature of God. By first addressing the religious context of Piero's *Adoration of the Child*, this essay will show how its imagery develops the theology of the Incarnation and, additionally, how the artist stages a confrontation between earthly and divine processes of incorporation. Piero's depiction of nature in the *Adoration of the Child* entices the viewer to work through a network of associated ideas and visual references on the cycle of life to provide an argument for Christ's dual nature. The tadpoles, furthermore, tie into what Michel Jeanneret has outlined as the Renaissance fascination with transforming shapes, or the idea of nature and art as gradually unfolding and in a perpetual state of becoming.⁷ Notions of constant change and renewal, of the integration and disintegration of matter, were seen as normal conditions of life, beginning with God's creation. From this perspective, Piero's *Adoration of the Child* is closely related to other paintings by the artist, both religious and secular, in which creatures from the natural and mythical worlds, from caterpillars to centaurs and satyrs, call attention to a broader theory of continuous creation, to ancient and early modern conceptions of spontaneous generation and evolution, and by extension, to Epicurean versus Christian beliefs about the relationship between the body and soul. Just as relevant, the tadpoles serve as a type of signature for the artist and are analogous to other aquatic life

⁶ On Botticelli's classical sources, see Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love*; and idem, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto*, 107–146. For Poliziano, see below n. 27.

⁷ Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion*. Jeanneret focuses on the "metamorphic sensibility" in Renaissance art and letters (French and Italian) as well as the fascination with origins. With regard to the writings and works of art by Leonardo da Vinci as well as the paintings by Piero di Cosimo, the author places emphasis on indeterminacy and the potential for mobility in both choice of subject matter and technique to awaken the viewer's imaginations and expand one's horizon concerning nature and the human condition.

with composite bodies that Piero painted, namely the mermaid, a figure long associated with the wondrous (and playful) diversity of nature and the poetic faculties of invention.

No documents have so far come to light identifying the original patron of Piero's *Adoration of the Child*, which is first recorded in the collection of Alexander Barker of London by 1854.⁸ Dating to c. 1490–1495 based on stylistic grounds, the painting is one of Piero's most sophisticated and lyrical efforts in the *tondo* (circular) format, showing a confident integration of figure and landscape.⁹ The gently rising blue hills and limpid sky expand Leonardo's technique of reproducing the optical and atmospheric effects of distance. Given the impressive size and high quality of Piero's *Adoration of the Child*, measuring sixty-six inches in diameter minus its original frame (now lost), it was most likely made for a wealthy Florentine patron who owned a residence large enough to display the painting properly: the optimal viewing height places the verdant meadow and fertile spring at eye level, a relatively high position on the wall, which also accommodates the exaggerated tilt of the Child and the open book.¹⁰ Its size and peculiar iconography further indicate that the Toledo *tondo* stemmed from a specific commission and not as a ready-made from Piero's shop.¹¹ The Madonna's act of opening her hands as

⁸ Studies of Piero's Toledo *Adoration of the Child* appear in the monographs by Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 166–170; Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*, 150–157, 173–174; Tempesti/Capretti, *Piero di Cosimo*, 108–109; and Bacci, *Piero di Cosimo*, 27–28, 72–73, 80–82; as well as in Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 203–205.

⁹ In terms of dating the Toledo *Adoration of the Child*, I am in agreement with Bacci, *Piero di Cosimo*, 27–28, 72–73, 80–82, who relates the monumental treatment of the Virgin's body, along with the meticulous rendering of the manuscript, to Piero's *Visitation* of 1489–1490 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). The thick, enamel-like paint surface and tightly painted figures of Piero's *Adoration of the Child* are consistent with the artist's technique from his early maturity.

¹⁰ See Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 49; and Lydecker, "The Domestic Setting," 66 n. 87, who cites an inventory from 1510 describing a *tondo* displayed high on a wall of a *camera*: "Una Nostra Donna tonda, di sopra, dorata intorno cho'l figliuolo e Santo Giovanni."

¹¹ Archival research by Olson ("Lost and Partially Found," and *The Florentine Tondo*) and by Lydecker ("The Domestic Setting,") has revealed that there was a great increase in the demand for paintings among the many prosperous merchant families in Florence during the fifteenth century. Evidence suggests that the *tondo* carried particular value, often being listed first in inventories among the prized possessions in the *camera* or *antecamera* (Lydecker, "The Domestic Setting," 65). See further Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior*.

she prays from the Bible also imitates the same gesture made by the saints and shepherds in the central panel of Hugo van der Goes's *Portinari Altarpiece*, which arrived in Florence in May 1483 and adorned the high altar of Church of Sant' Egidio at the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova.¹² Commissioned by Tommaso Portinari, who ran the Medici bank in Bruges, Hugo's monumental triptych had an immediate impact on Florentine artists. For his part, Piero endowed Mary with exaggerated hands, carefully articulated in light and shadow, more elegant and less rustic than those of Hugo's figures, but clearly with the idea of enhancing the sense of popular piety in his *Adoration of the Child*. Occupying the center of the composition, Mary's hands play an important role and ostensibly activate the narrative. Piero also marveled at Hugo's near botanical rendering of nature and its implied religious symbolism.

Piero's subject corresponds with one of the most important innovations in religious painting of the Renaissance: the transformation in the 1450s of the narrative of the Nativity into a new devotional theme — that of the Virgin humbly adoring the newborn Child. As Charles Dempsey and Megan Holmes have shown, the artist responsible for the development of this new and widely popular species of devotional imagery was the Florentine painter Fra Filippo Lippi (c. 1406–1469).¹³ In various works associated with

¹² The stylistic relationship between Piero and Flemish art has been long noted and is most recently discussed by Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 47–48; and Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*, 123–125. Piero's admiration for the *Portinari Altarpiece* was shared by his older contemporary Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494), who refashioned key details of the work into his altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Dated 1485, Ghirlandaio's altarpiece was commissioned by Francesco Sassetti, who was at that time the general manager of the Medici Bank in Florence, for his chapel in the church of Santa Trinità. Flemish art was commonly labeled devout (*divota*) by patrons and artists alike in Florence, and Ghirlandaio's quotations of Hugo's work establish a distinctive visual vocabulary within the patronage associated with the Medici bankers. In addition, Jill Burke, *Changing Patrons*, 155–187, explores the potential connection between Girolamo Savonarola's preaching and the visual characteristics of Flemish and Florentine art to inspire a particular strain of devotion, especially as it relates to works of art commissioned by Piero di Cosimo's patrons (such as the Pugliese).

¹³ Charles Dempsey, "A Hypothesis Concerning the *Castello Nativity*," 349–354; and Megan Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, 172–182. Holmes (172) observes that "Fra Filippo transformed the subject into a distinct devotional image set within an elaborate forested landscape with a rich imagery of sylvan flora, geological features, and atmosphere, which functioned as visual metaphors for the Incarnation, penitence, and eremitical religious devotion."

the Medici family, such as his *Adoration of the Child* of c. 1459 (Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldgalerie, Berlin), designed as an altarpiece for the private chapel in the Medici palace in Florence, Lippi portrayed the Madonna kneeling on the ground in adoration of the infant Christ in the presence of Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. The general outlines of Lippi's composition, like Piero's after him, draw on Saint Bridget of Sweden's mystical vision of the birth of Christ, as related in her fourteenth-century *Revelations*, as well as on representations of the Nativity in early Tuscan painting. Lippi's new formulation, combining devotional content with narrative references, proved elastic and adaptable to various contexts. Nonetheless, one feature remained constant in Adoration scenes: the central role of Mary as mother, god-bearer, and intercessor.

In Piero's composition, Mary is not looking directly at the Child, but is instead praying from the Bible, inscribed with verses taken from Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews 1:10–11, a quotation of Psalm 101:25–26.¹⁴ This is the Epistle for the third and most important Mass on Christmas day, for the Book of Hebrews praises Christ as both divine and human and confirms his lordship over all creation:

And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt remainest: and they all shall wax old as doth a garment. (King James Version)

Through her prayer, Mary serves as intercessor to assist in the salvation of mankind.¹⁵ It follows that Christ's birth is here presented as a fulfillment of Scripture. Moreover, the light shines on the book through Mary's open hands as the text emphasizes creation and divine providence.

The juxtaposition of codex and child brings the mystery of the Incarnation to the fore. The Madonna's cloak lies under the book and protects it from the ground as if it were her newborn. Bathed in a clear light and looking as if the page is ready to be turned, the codex also calls attention to

¹⁴ For the inscription, see Covi, *The Inscription in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Painting*, 245, 458.

¹⁵ Van Buren, "The Canonical Office in Renaissance Painting," 44 n. 24, notes that "[s]ince this is the Epistle for the third and most important Mass on Christmas day, the Virgin is here performing a sacerdotal function."

itself as a piece of artifice, a testimony to the artist's mimetic skills. This was a distinctive characteristic of Piero's art much admired by Vasari. In his discussion of Piero's *Visitation* altarpiece of 1489–1490, a work commissioned by Gino Capponi and originally on display in the Florentine church of Santo Spirito, Vasari remarks: "Here he counterfeited a book bound in parchment, somewhat old, which seems to be real [*che par vero*], and also some balls that he gave to the Saint Nicholas, shining and casting gleams of light and reflections from one to another; from which even by that time men could perceive the strangeness of his mind, and his constant seeking after difficulties [*che si conosceva infino allora la stranezza del suo cervello et il cercare che e' faceva de le cose difficili*]."¹⁶ These same tricks of illusion in the Toledo tondo make the imagery — from the codex to the flesh of Christ — more penetrating to the viewer, blurring the boundary between representation and reality.

In fact, Leo Steinberg has observed that the intent of representations of the Adoration, to extol the Word's Incarnation, also resulted in their popularity: "Such pictures project a new iconography that is neither iconic nor narrative ... They are historiated emblems designed to convey the central mystery of the Creed."¹⁷ A relevant example is Andrea della Robbia's *Adoration* altarpiece of 1479 (Chiesa Maggiore, La Verna), which shows the Madonna and angels adoring the Child with the Latin inscription in the *predella* adapted from the Gospel of John (1:14): "Verbum caro fa[c]tu[m] est de vergine M[ari]a."¹⁸ Steinberg further argues that Christ's nudity in Renaissance art, such as one finds in della Robbia's La Verna altarpiece and in Piero's Toledo *tondo*, was a sign of his sexuality and of his manifestation in the flesh with the Incarnation.

It is not just Christ's humanity that is presented to the viewer in Piero's *Adoration of the Child*. The infant's sleep also anticipates the *pietà* — prophetic of his future death on the cross, his Resurrection, and the foundation of the Church. The sacrificial theme is reinforced by the altar-like rock on which he rests, as well as by the rock formation behind him, which resembles a closed

¹⁶ Vasari-Bettarini/Barocchi, *Le vite*, 4:61; Vasari-De Vere, *Lives*, 1:651. It has recently come to light that Piero worked as a miniaturist; see Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 17.

¹⁷ Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 122.

¹⁸ Discussed by Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 121–122, who further cites Pope-Hennessy, "Thoughts on Andrea della Robbia." See also Gentilini, *I Della Robbia*, 1:193, 209.

tomb.¹⁹ The depictions of early Roman Christian basilicas and Florentine religious structures in the background complement the notions of sacrifice with emblems of salvation through the Church.²⁰ Piero also transports the viewer across Biblical time through the figure of Joseph in the background. Joseph's state of sleep alludes to several passages from the Gospel of Matthew, including one in which an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and instructs him to flee to Egypt to escape King Herod's massacre of the Innocents (2:13). In the Toledo *tondo*, the ox and donkey in the background and the sack on which the child rests are common motifs found in depictions of the Holy Family's rest on their flight. The apocryphal book of Pseudo Matthew (16–24) also mentions that a spring miraculously appeared next to the Holy Family on their rest, providing refreshing drink. Because of the importance of Christ's Incarnation for Piero's *Adoration of the Child*, Joseph's slumber may relate to another relevant passage in Matthew (1:20–21), in this case pertaining to the angelic message of Christ's divine conception and his role as Savior, delivered to Joseph in a dream at a time when he doubted Mary's chastity and considered divorcing her.²¹

¹⁹ A comparable tomb structure, shown open, appears in Cosimo Rosselli's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, datable to c. 1495 (John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia). It is also worth comparing Piero's *tondo* with Botticelli's *Virgin Adoring the Sleeping Christ Child (Wemyss Madonna)*, now in the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, which dates to c. 1482. Botticelli portrays the infant Christ asleep, with looming rocks on the right evoking his future sepulcher. The strawberry plant in the right-hand corner has been read as an allusion to the Incarnation, while the *hortus conclusus* of pink roses symbolizes Mary's purity and immaculate nature. In Botticelli's composition, the rose bushes, together with the Virgin's cloak folded under the infant, serve to protect Christ, whereas in Piero's *tondo*, he appears in the open and hence more vulnerable, suggesting his impending fate. On the recent cleaning and iconography of the painting, see Clifford, "Botticelli's *Wemyss Madonna*," and Nicoletta Pons, entry in *Botticelli and Filippino*, 194–196.

²⁰ Based on previous observations, Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*, 173, identifies the church in the left background as Old Saint Peter's, while the tall, rusticated building just behind it resembles Orsanmichele in Florence.

²¹ Although implied in the Toledo *tondo*, this event is explicitly shown in another *Adoration of the Child* by Piero (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), a *tondo* painted around 1500–1505. In the foreground, Mary kneels in adoration before the infant Jesus along with Saint John the Baptist and an angel. Behind them, Joseph descends the steps of the manger, walking with his eyes shut as if in a dream and illuminated by a supernatural light. God's messenger angel appears at the top of the stairs, having just informed Joseph of Mary's divine conception. See Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 252, and Tempesti/Capretti,

But it is the natural world, not supernatural apparitions, that offers an interrogation on Christ's miraculous Incarnation and his dual nature in the Toledo *tondo*. Details including the dandelion, the cut tree sprouting new branches, and the goldfinch have all been read as symbols of Christ's life: his birth, death, and Resurrection. Furthermore, the water flowing from the rock that feeds the spring carries important typological associations with the Baptism and Eucharist, sacraments that stem from Moses miraculously striking water from the rock.²² All of these elements function on the symbolic level, but they can also be interpreted on the natural level: natural birth, death, and regeneration as compared with divine birth, death, and resurrection.

The tadpoles swimming in the waters just below the sleeping infant provide the most compelling analogy for the miracle of Christ's human formation through sexless conception. Their metamorphosis into frogs witnesses nature's secrets of regeneration and renewal. Piero intentionally structures a relationship between the wonders of their bodily transmutation and Christ's miraculous powers of transformation at the Incarnation. Simultaneously, the sleeping child aligns the Christian mysteries of the Passion and Resurrection with the cycle of nature.²³

Without denying the truth of the Incarnation, questions on how the divine Logos appropriates itself to human nature preoccupied early Christian writers and reached the level of articulate debate in later centuries. Augustine, for example, remarked in his *Confessions* 7:19: "But what mystery this might carry with it, the Word was made flesh, I could not so much imagine."²⁴ And

Piero di Cosimo, 119–120. Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 326 n. 35, is skeptical about the allusion to this Biblical passage, and Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*, 152, suggests an extrabiblical reference.

²² In Saint Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10:4), the rock and the flowing spring are symbols of Christ: "All did all drink the same supernatural drink; for they drank of that supernatural Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ."

²³ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 174, observes that in Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow*, c. 1500–1505 (National Gallery, London), "[t]he sleep of the Child relates to the cycle of nature, which wakes to new life in spring. Early spring, which dominates the landscape, is the ecclesiastical time of the Passion and the Resurrection. Thus the landscape ... contains the argument that the Christian mystery is in harmony with the cycle of nature." Belting goes on to relate the landscape to Virgil's *Georgics* and presents an argument on the connection between painting and poetry in the context of the divine, a point that is central to my overarching thesis about Piero's *Adoration of the Child*.

²⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7:19; also cited and discussed by Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 120.

according to Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, at the Annunciation "the Son of God forthwith entered [Mary's] womb and from her acquired human flesh. At that very point the spirit was created and placed into the sanctified womb as a human being complete in all parts of His body, though very small and childlike. He was then to grow naturally in the womb like other children, but the infusion of the soul and the separation of the limbs were not delayed as in others. Thus He was a perfect God as well as a perfect man."²⁵ In Piero's *tondo*, Mary's open hands express a sense of wonder over her child's dual nature. That the theology of the Incarnation permeated Florentine religious culture, especially among Piero's patrons, is testified by his brilliant *Incarnation* altarpiece (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), a work painted about 1504 for the Tedaldi family chapel in the church of Santissima Annunziata.²⁶

It is this very sense of mystery and incomprehension surrounding Christ's dual nature and the idea of nonsexual generation that is central to the experience of the natural world in Piero's Toledo *tondo*. Since antiquity, tadpoles have captivated the imagination. Pliny's *Natural History*, a book that was first printed in 1469 and long recognized as an authoritative source on the natural world, comments on the inexplicable metamorphosis of tadpoles in a section devoted to the generation of frogs and fishes. At the time Piero designed his *Adoration of the Child*, a heated controversy arose between Poliziano and the Ferrarese physician Nicolò Leonicensi (1426–1524) over the authority of Pliny's *Natural History*.²⁷ In various letters and publications, Poliziano and Leonicensi, among others, debated the accuracy of Pliny's interpretations and classifications of the natural world. Despite their differences (Poliziano adamantly defended Pliny against Leonicensi's accusations of error), all parties involved in the debate agreed on one point: the necessity of empirical evidence and direct observation of nature. When discussing the reproductive cycle of frogs, Pliny states:

²⁵ *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 19–20; also cited and discussed by Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 134.

²⁶ See Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 207–211, and Tempesti/Capretti, *Piero di Cosimo*, 127–129.

²⁷ On the debate over Pliny's *Natural History* in the Renaissance, see Thorndike, *History of Magic*, 4:593–610; Castiglioni, "The School of Ferrara"; Nauert Jr., "Humanists, Scientists, and Pliny"; and for a broader history of the reception and legacy of Pliny's writings, see Findlen, "Natural History." Leonicensi visited Florence in 1490 and met with Lorenzo de' Medici and his intimate circle of humanist colleagues, including Poliziano.

The female produces tiny pieces of black flesh, which are known by the name of *gyrini*, and are only to be distinguished by the eyes and tail; very soon, however, the feet are developed, and the tail, becoming bifurcate, forms the hind legs. It is a most singular thing, but, after a life of six months' duration, frogs melt away into slime, though no one ever sees how it is done; after which they come to life again in the water during the spring, just as they were before. This is effected by some occult operation of Nature [*naturae perinde occulta ratione*], and happens regularly every year.²⁸

Pliny goes on to discuss what he believes, albeit mistakenly, are other examples of spontaneous or nonsexual reproduction in mussels, scallops, and oysters. In Piero's *tondo*, nature and the divine mutually reinforce one another, as the "occult-like" operations of tadpoles parallel the mysteries of Christ's Incarnation and *in utero* formation. For Pliny, nature was a supreme maker and mother of all (*parens ... ac divina rerum artifex*), a powerful generative force that inspires awe.²⁹ It is also not fortuitous that Piero depicted a dandelion next to the tadpole-filled water in his Toledo *tondo*. The dandelion clock is one of nature's most fugitive forms, breaking up with the slightest breeze and distributing its filaments on the winds.³⁰ Yet in this way the plant, a bitter herb symbolic of Christ's Passion, can inseminate regions far and wide, regenerating itself without the need of pollination — not unlike Mary's divine impregnation.

The inquiry into nature's secrets of metamorphosis and self-generation is also central to the experience of another *tondo* by Piero: his *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist and an Angel* in Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, datable to c. 1500–1510

²⁸ For the Latin, see Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 9.74.159. I use the more literal translation by John Bostock and H. T. Riley from 1855, which can be accessed online at www.perseus.tufts.edu. The tadpoles are only mentioned in passing by Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 167, and Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*, 150.

²⁹ Pliny, *Natural History*, 22.56.117.

³⁰ On the more traditional symbolism of the dandelion as a bitter herb symbolic of Christ's Passion, see D'Ancona, *The Garden in the Renaissance*, 126–128.

(Fig. 6.3).³¹ Perched on a tree stump and propped up by Mary, Christ leans on and almost emerges out of the Bible to emphasize the Word made flesh. To the left, a large caterpillar lies on a twig atop an altar-like rock similar to the one painted in the Toledo *Adoration of the Child*, ready to be sacrificed by a blackbird.³² From their chrysalis state, caterpillars transform into butterflies, which, since Greek antiquity, were associated with the soul (*psyche*). In essence, the caterpillar in the São Paulo *tondo* serves as a metaphor for the relationship between the human body and Christian soul (or divine spirit). What is more, like tadpoles, the mysterious nature of caterpillars offers an interpretive gloss on the miracle and mystery surrounding Christ's associated powers of generation and transformation. Although the early provenance of the São Paulo *tondo* is unknown, it is thematically related to the Toledo *tondo* through its insistence on natural processes that relate to Christ's birth, death, and Resurrection, including the detail of the dandelion at the lower right. More than just symbols of fertility and rebirth, the tadpoles and caterpillars invite deliberation on Christ's two natures.

For any Florentine viewer of Piero's São Paulo *tondo*, the caterpillar would also have called to mind one of the most beloved metaphors in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In canto 10 of *Purgatorio*, within the circle of pride, Dante compares the Christian soul with the transformation of a worm (caterpillar) into a butterfly, as he warns vain and prideful sinners (his readers) with the following words:

O proud Christians, wretched and weary, who, sick in mental vision, put trust in backward steps: are you not aware that we are worms [*vermi*], born to form the angelic butterfly that flies unto judgment without defenses? Why does

³¹ Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 170–172, and Tempesti/Capretti, *Piero di Cosimo*, 129.

³² Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 172, considers the caterpillar's "adverse, biblical symbolism as an agent of blight — a consumer interchangeable in the Old Testament with the locust or cankerworm" and links the creature, though somewhat spuriously, to other portentous omens. Geronimus's largely negative iconographic reading opposes the more positive value assigned to the caterpillar, suggesting new life, offered by Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 252 n. 123.

your mind soar up aloft, since you are as it were imperfect insects, even as the worm in which full form is wanting?³³

Dante reprimands the haughty, pride-driven Christians who, although they may yearn for flight, are too bound by their earthly pursuits ever to release their souls to God. In his 1481 *Comento sopra la Comedia*, Cristoforo Landino glosses Dante's metaphor of the imperfect worm with Psalm 22:6, which reads: "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people."³⁴ The worm, according to Augustine's well-known commentaries on this passage, is proof of God's creation, for from the flesh of worms (man), God makes angelic spirits. He further argues that God proves his own divinity and divine generation (the Word made flesh) by labeling himself a worm, a creature (no man) conceived without intercourse, thus affirming that Christ was born of human flesh but without human generation.³⁵ Considering Dante's metaphor of the worm (caterpillar), it is clear that Piero di Cosimo's nature functions not solely on a scientific level, but also on a poetic level, allowing the audience to contemplate a range of issues related to earthly and divine miracles of self-generation, polymorphous bodies, the human condition, and the distinction between body and soul.

³³ Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio*, 10:121–129: "O superbi cristian, miseri lassi, / che, de la vista de la mente infermi, / fidanza avete ne' retrosi passi, // non v'accorgete voi che noi siam vermi / nati a formar l'angelica farfalla, / che vola a la giustizia senza schermi? // Di che l'animo vostro in alto galla, / poi siete quasi antomata in difetto, / si come vermo in cui formazion falla?"

³⁴ Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia*, 3:1212–1213. See further the commentary by Singleton in Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio*, 2:217–218, and Holbrook, *Dante and the Animal Kingdom*, 340–343.

³⁵ *St. Augustine on the Psalms*, 1:213: "Truly, man is a worm as well; but he [God] is a worm as well; but he is 'a worm and no man.' Why no man? Because he is God. Why then did he so abase himself as to say 'a worm'? Is it because a worm is born of flesh without coition, as Christ was of the Virgin Mary? Both a worm then, and yet no man. Why a worm? Because he was mortal, because he was born of the flesh, because he was born without human generation. Why is he no man? Because 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.'" And Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 1–10, 52: "For all men who are born of the flesh, what are they but worms? And from the worms he makes angels. For if the Lord himself says, 'But I am a worm, and not a man,' who hesitates to say this which was also written in Job [25:6]: 'How much more is man rottenness and the son of man a worm?'"

Instead of serving as predetermined iconographic symbols, Piero's ornaments of nature are more poetic and proverbial. Like the actors in Aesop's fables, the tadpoles and caterpillars narrow the gap between nature and the divine.³⁶ Leonardo da Vinci, who was a professional acquaintance of Piero di Cosimo, owned three printed editions of Aesop's fables (two in Italian and one in French) and wrote a number of original aphorisms and fables, one even dealing with a caterpillar (*bruco*).³⁷ Fables, parables, and proverbs featuring analogies from the animal world also appear throughout the Bible. In the Book of Proverbs (30:24–28), the wisdom of God is conveyed through nature's smallest creatures. Ants and spiders are counted among the things that are little upon the earth but are exceedingly wise and crafty, reflecting the paradoxical nature of the divine. In fact, the natural world in Piero's *tondi* constitutes another type of "book": the Book of Nature. Medieval and Renaissance theologians, not to mention natural scientists, considered the Book of Nature as primary source material on the level with the Bible.³⁸ The metaphor of the Book of Nature (implied in Romans 1:19–20) challenges human capacity to recognize God in nature, to seek the infinite and subtle correspondences between creation and the Creator.

Piero's *tondi* are at one and the same time devotional images as well as essays on incorporation, generation, and formation — essays on the relationship between the earthly body and the heavenly spirit, with the wonders of nature serving as analogies to the mysteries of divine transformation. The paintings further allow their respective audiences to deliberate on questions of creation and origins, of nature as a primary artificer as opposed to the

³⁶ The earliest and most popular vernacular translation of Aesop's fables printed in Italy was the moralized edition published in Verona in 1479: *Aesopus moralisatus, latine et italice*. Illustrated with lively woodcuts, this edition was the first to publish the Latin verse translation of the Greek fables by Walter of England, accompanied by a vernacular translation in double sonnet (*sonetto materiale* and *sonetto morale*) by Accio Zucco. On Aesop's fables and visual culture in Italy, see Fiorenza, *Dosso Dossi*, 127–160, with further bibliography.

³⁷ See Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, 2:315–346. Aside from the shared stylistic affinities between the art of Leonardo and that of Piero, both artists served on the 1504 committee to decide on the location of Michelangelo's *David*, for which see Levine, "The Location of Michelangelo's *David*," 31–49.

³⁸ On the Book of Nature, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 319–326; Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 55–57; and Weemans, "Herri met de Bles's Sleeping Peddler," 459–481.

workmanship of God and divine providence. Such religious works provide a screen for the projection and critique of issues regarding hard, primitive nature found in Piero's celebrated *spalliera* paintings, which draw their imagery from Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*), that major text promoting natural evolution that was rediscovered by the Florentine humanist Poggio Bracciolini in 1417 and was first published in Italy around 1473.³⁹ Lucretius contends that human beings, being feebler and frailer than most animals, could not be the product of a benevolent providential design as Genesis suggests. He also attacks religious superstition and emphasizes the importance of the body, without which the soul cannot survive. Thanks to Erwin Panofsky, we know just how important Lucretius's writings were for Piero di Cosimo's artistic imagination, serving as the foundation for several of his most important secular paintings.⁴⁰ A number of his *spalliera* panels juxtapose man's evolution to that of centaurs and other corrupt beasts doomed to extinction. In the *Forest Fire* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), for instance, one finds man in the context of hybrid animals and other creatures in various stages of natural evolution, such as the pig and deer with human faces.⁴¹ By contrast, the quotation from the Book of Hebrews in the Toledo *tondo* decrees that Christ founded the heavens and the earth and that he is superior to all angels. Augustine's exposition on these passages asserts that God created equally by his word and by his hand, and that the heavens — the place of the divine spirit and Christian soul — will endure, whereas the earthly body is merely a garment that waxes old. A subtext of the Toledo and São Paulo paintings may be Lactantius's *De opificio Dei, sive de formatione hominis* (*On the Workmanship of God, or the Formation of Man*). In this widely read treatise, Lactantius counters the Epicurean denial of providence, showing that man is under God's special care, with the rational ordering of the body

³⁹ As Alison Brown reveals, this was a difficult and dangerous poem that had a wide and varied reception in Florence, mainly because it contributed to a "decivilized" view of human nature; see Brown, "Lucretius and the Epicureans," and idem "De-civilizing the Renaissance."

⁴⁰ Panofsky, "The Early History of Man."

⁴¹ On the *Forest Fire* and its thematic relationship to Piero's *Hunting Scenes* panels, see Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 134–141; Brown, "Lucretius and the Epicureans," 52–54; Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*, 62–81; and Panofsky, "The Early History of Man," 51–57. On the popularity of *spalliera* panels in the Renaissance, see Anne Barriault, "*Spalliera* Paintings."

and autonomy of the soul being proof of divine providence.⁴² Mary's role as mother is equally important to providential history, as she was not only the "vessel" of the divine, but also gave human flesh to Christ.⁴³

In short, Piero's secular and religious works display what Jeanneret argues is a profound meditation by the artist on the metamorphic world: on creation in progress (even the idea of God's continued work toward perfection beyond Genesis), on creatures and spirits perpetually transforming and seeking new forms or matter.⁴⁴ The artificial segregation of Piero's secular and religious works in recent monographs only splinters our view of the cultural problems that occupied him, and especially how the artist served Florentine society's obsession with family and dynasty, rooted in the ideals of Christian and pagan origins.⁴⁵

By way of conclusion, I want to elevate this interpretation to another level because the themes of creation, generation, and transformation in Piero's works find a direct correspondence with human ingenuity and artistic invention. Inventiveness, as Vasari notes, was a distinguishing feature of Piero's art. The tadpoles in Piero's Toledo *tondo* constitute a self-conscious display,

⁴² The text is translated by Fletcher, *The Works of Lactantius*, 49–91. See further, Roots, "The *De Opificio Dei*." The *De opificio Dei* additionally argues that dreams are sent by God to reveal the impending good or evils of future events; *The Works of Lactantius*, 88. Thus, Piero's emphasis on sleep in his Toledo *tondo* underwrites the divine agency of the soul, just as the caterpillar in the São Paulo *tondo* exposes the vulnerability of the flesh.

⁴³ See Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," 422–424, who in both complementing and challenging Steinberg's thesis that Christ's sexuality (his penis) in Renaissance painting signaled his humanity introduces an array of late medieval texts that consider Mary (woman) as the flesh of Christ. See further her book *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 205–222.

⁴⁴ Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion*, 108–114.

⁴⁵ A related example is the reverse of Raphael's portraits of Agnolo Doni and Maddalena Doni of c. 1506–1507 (Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence), which depict the Ovidian scenes of the flood and the myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha from the first book of the *Metamorphoses*. Andrée Hayum suggestively argues that these images were intended to bolster the honour and primacy of the Doni family while expressing fecundity and the promise of illustrious progeny. The portraits would have been displayed under the same roof as Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*, with its allusion to the Biblical deluge and its emphasis on the family unit; Andrée Hayum, "Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*." On the issue of patronage and Florentine family history, see further Rubin, "Domenico Ghirlandaio and the Meaning of History in Fifteenth-Century Florence." Notably, among his images of primitive man, Piero also painted a *tondo* showing the history of Adam and Eve (Galleria Luigi Bellini, Florence), for which see Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 172–178.

serving as a type of signature. They are emblems of his imaginative faculties that relate to another type of poetic image: the mermaid in his *Allegory* of c. 1480–1490 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) (Fig. 6.4).⁴⁶ This small panel shows a winged female figure, probably representing the personification of poetic Virtue, tethering a wild horse on a small island while a mermaid swims in the murky waters below. The detail of the mermaid recalls Horace's famous discussion of *ut pictura poesis* ("the painting of poetry") from his *Ars poetica*, which associates, though in ironic fashion, the poetic imagination with the pictorial. Horace invokes the image of a mermaid as an example of the transgression of artistic license, a monstrous creature borne from the fantasy of painters run afoul in salacious waters.⁴⁷ For Piero, on the other hand, the representation of a mermaid serves as a vehicle to celebrate pictorial virtuosity, or the ability to create, combine, and supplement what is not found in nature. In this respect, Piero's fertile imagination competes with the poet's *fantasia*.⁴⁸ The indeterminate state of the mermaid, a creature suspended between two identities, also rivals the primordial theories of spontaneous generation and protean bodies found in Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Most recently, Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 71–75, suggests that Piero's Washington *Allegory* (which he titles *Allegory of Chastity Triumphant over Lust*) may have served as a cover or backing for his famous portrait of Simonetta Vespucci in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, and thus dates to the early 1480s. For various interpretations of the Washington panel, see Tempesti/Capretti, *Piero di Cosimo*, 101.

⁴⁷ Horace, *Ars poetica*, 3–4, "... ut turpiter atrum/ desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne." Lee, "Ut pictura poesis," 199, in discussing Horace's doctrine of the sister arts, observes that the poet, "after describing a painting of grotesque hybrids and comparing it to a book whose vain imaginings are fashioned like a sick man's dreams, admits the equal right of painters and poets to liberty of imagination, provided this potentially dangerous Pegasus be tethered to the stall of the probable and congruous." Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 74, sees the image of the mermaid as a purely negative symbol. For the personification of Virtue, see Giralaldi, *De deis gentium*, 36.

⁴⁸ Themes of creation and human ingenuity abound in Piero's art, from his *Construction of a Palace* (John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota), to his two *spalliera* panels *Prometheus Fashioning the First Man* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich) and *The Theft of Fire and Punishment of Prometheus* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg).

⁴⁹ Like Pliny, Lucretius names earth mother (*mater*) and producer of all things (5:795–796). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1:416–429) also speaks of the earth's powers of spontaneous generation; see Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion*, 106.

Piero's fascination with sea creatures, whether natural or mythical, caught the attention of Vasari. In discussing the artist's *Perseus and Andromeda*, made for Filippo Strozzi around 1510, Vasari observes: "for Piero never made a more lovely or more highly finished picture than this one, seeing that it is not possible to find a more bizarre or more fantastic sea-monster [*la più bizzarra orca marina né la più capricciosa*] than that which Piero imagined and painted."⁵⁰ The recognition of Piero's excellence in producing bizarre subject matter recalls Lucian's description of Zeuxis's famous and equally bizarre painting of a nursing centaur. In his epideictic essay *Zeuxis or Antiochus*, Lucian bemoans the praise bestowed on his own oratory because the audience admired the novelty of his ideas and the strangeness of his inventions while overlooking his grammatical refinement. Lucian compares the reception of his oratory to a similar reaction Zeuxis had previously garnered for his painting of a nursing centaur, praised more for its unusual subject matter than its flawless technique.⁵¹ It is worth noting that this *topos* appears in Botticelli's famed *Calumny of Apelles*, which is itself based on another ancient painting described by Lucian that takes slander as its theme.⁵² The nursing centaur features as an architectural relief ornament in Botticelli's work, a supplement that encourages judgment within the context of invidious praise (a backhanded compliment), a form of slander (calumny). A satyr mother and child, a slight variant on the *topos*, can also be found in Piero's *Discovery of Honey* (Fig. 6.5), one of a pair of *spalliera* panels made for Giovanni di Guidantonio Vespucci (1476–1549) to celebrate his marriage to Namiciana di Benedetto Nerli in 1500.⁵³ Not surprisingly, Piero goes one step further to align artistic

⁵⁰ Vasari-Bettarini/Barocchi, *Vite*, 67; Vasari-De Vere, *Lives*, 656. Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 108, and Cavazzini, "Un document ritrovato," 129–130, both note that the patron was most likely Giovan Battista Strozzi, commonly referred to as Filippo Strozzi il Giovane (1488–1538).

⁵¹ Lucian, *Zeuxis or Antiochus*. See also Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte*, 4, where the author invokes the image of the centaur as an expression of artistic *fantasia* equal to that of poets.

⁵² Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) is based on Lucian's *Calumny of Apelles*, an *ekphrasis* made popular by Leon Battista Alberti in the third book of his *De pictura* of 1435, for which see Massing, *Du texte à l'image*. The monochrome relief of the centaur family appears in the lower right-hand corner of Botticelli's painting.

⁵³ For Piero's *Discovery of Honey* and its pendant *The Misfortunes of Silenus* (The Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts), see Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 100–106; Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*, 81–86; and Panofsky, "The Early History of Man," 59–65.

creation with the laws of natural generation: the anthropomorphic tree in the center of the composition takes the form of a primordial womb giving birth to an infant satyr. The distinctive imagery accords with Lucretius's account of nature's earliest formations, when the earth "first gave forth the generations of mortal creatures at that time, for there was great abundance of heat and moisture in the fields. Therefore, wherever a suitable place was found, wombs would grow [*crescebant uteri terram radicibus apti*], holding to the earth by roots; and ... in due time the age of the infants broke these."⁵⁴ In his *Discovery of Honey*, Piero combines Lucretian models of primordial generation with Lucianic motifs of artistic invention to vaunt his own generative artistic abilities.⁵⁵ Here again, we see the artist's infatuation with nature's process of creation, transformation, and renewal and the underlying associations with human artifice.⁵⁶ With characteristic irony and wit, Piero seeks through his art to fashion himself as a modern-day Zeuxis, not the painter of the beautiful women of Croton, but the painter of "bizarre" ancient subjects.

For Vasari, Piero's meticulous representations of the bizarre manifest an alternative reality. The artist seems to claim a god-like power through his painting, a type of *deus artifex*, as wonders of the divine and natural worlds coexist in his art. Images of tadpoles, caterpillars, mermaids, and satyrs, with their composite bodies and ever-changing forms, serve as emblems of divine

⁵⁴ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 5:805–820, goes on to state that the earth provided nourishing liquids, foods, and comforting beds of herbage for the infants. Vasari admired Piero's anthropomorphic nature in his religious works, such as in the Tedaldi *Incarnation*, where one also finds womb-like trees in the background, about which Vasari states: "he made there a landscape that is very bizarre [*un paese bizzarro*], what with the strange trees and certain grottoes"; Vasari-Bettarini/Barocchi, *Vite*, 65; trans. Vasari-De Vere, *Lives*, 655.

⁵⁵ Matthews Jr., "Piero di Cosimo's *Discovery of Honey*," reads, among other motifs, the figures of Bacchus and Ariadne as guardians of marriage; the womb of the hollow tree goes hand in hand with the honey, an ancient nuptial food. On the mythic and anthropological associations of honey with marriage and seduction in antiquity, see further Detienne, "The Myth of 'Honeyed Orpheus.'" By contrast, Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 104, finds both the evolutionist and amorous interpretations "largely remote" from Piero's imagery.

⁵⁶ See Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion*, 19–26, for connections between divine and human creations with regard to themes of "slow, patient crafting, continuous creation, [and] projection of the constructor to center stage." The author cites relevant examples in the writings of Bernard Palissy, Joachim du Bellay, and Guillaume du Bartas, among others.

nature and the human condition. Piero's imagination spawns new creations and unexpected combinations, rivaling not only the works of ancient artists and poets, but also the works of nature. As a result, Piero himself, the artist whom Vasari claims was in touch with the subtle secrets of nature, becomes a new source of generation.⁵⁷

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⁵⁷ The primacy of Piero's art was not lost on Panofsky, who observed: "Piero's world seems fantastic, not because its elements are unreal, but, on the contrary, because the very veracity of his interpretation is convincingly evocative of a time remote from our potential experience. His pictures emanate a pervasive atmosphere of strangeness because they succeed in conjuring up an age older than Christianity, older even than paganism in the historical sense of the word — in fact, older than civilization"; Panofsky, "The Early History of Man," 67. Brown, "Lucretius and the Epicureans," 53, moreover suggests that considering Piero's paintings and his way of life as described by Vasari, "we can with hindsight see that they may well have reflected belief in a natural life-style — such as Epicurus advocated — that later critics have failed to understand."

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