

A FOUNTAIN BEWITCHED:  
GENDER, SIN, AND PROPAGANDA IN THE MASSA MARITTIMA MURAL

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## **ABSTRACT**

**ERICA M. LONGENBACH: A Fountain Bewitched: Gender, Sin, and Propaganda in the  
Massa Marittima Mural  
(Under the direction of Dorothy H. Verkerk)**

The fountain mural discovered in 2000 in the Tuscan town of Massa Marittima has drawn international attention due to its rare iconographic allusions to fertility and witchcraft in late thirteenth century Italy. The mural, which depicts eight women underneath a deciduous tree with phalli hanging from its branches in lieu of fruit, raises numerous questions. In this thesis, I examine the positive classical iconographic associations to fertility and auspiciousness and how these symbols came to be reinterpreted within a Christian context as elements of sin and temptation. Furthermore, the connections between the lingering classical prototype of a woman as a being of unbridled sexuality, temptation, and bearer of prophetic knowledge continued to manifest themselves in medieval folklore beliefs of witchcraft and its artistic representations in the high and late Middle Ages. The mural is evidence of how these anxieties were effectively appropriated into the genre of propagandistic political art during a time of civil unrest in central Italy.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In a remote town nestled in the hills of Tuscany, a medieval mural without parallel in western art was recently uncovered that has offered a rare glimpse into everyday Italian life during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Long forgotten, the Massa Marittima Mural is located on one of the interior walls of the communal water fountain in the town's central piazza, Piazza Garibaldi, where it had been hidden for centuries under layers of plaster, lime, and dirt (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Art historians have only begun to analyze the multi-layered meaning of the complex (and rather startling) composition. Upon first glance, the mural seems to be a picturesque scene illustrating nature and women performing domestic chores, an appropriate choice for the *fontana*, where it was a woman's job to collect water everyday for the household. Against a stone background, a large deciduous tree dominates the center of the mural. Women dressed in colorful medieval garments gather underneath, and it appears that they are working and conversing among themselves in a scene of domesticity. Large black birds fly above the women's heads and fill the empty space between the leafy branches. The tree bears a curious fruit: from the branches hang approximately twenty-five erect phalli (Fig. 2). What are we, as modern viewers, to make of this erotically charged (and what some have referred to as pornographic) scene?

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<sup>1</sup> George Ferzoco, *The Massa Marittima Mural* (Florence: Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2004), 74.

The mural was accidentally discovered during the communal water fountain's restoration and is just now receiving international attention. The Fonte dell'Abbondanza was completed in 1265 and built near the Oratory of St. Michael (Fig. 3). It is in an appropriate location because throughout the Tuscan region, St. Michael was worshipped as a protector of pregnant women and as a nurturer of children—qualities related to the succor that an intra-city water source would have provided to the hilltop town of Massa Marittima.<sup>2</sup> The fountain's design consisted of three ogival arches that opened into a basin covered with a four-part vault.<sup>3</sup>

The mural, known by scholars as 'Fonte dell'Abbondanza,' or the Tree of Fertility, is located on the far left of the three interior bays (Fig. 4). The composition is divided into fairly symmetrical halves, with four women standing on each side of the tree's trunk. Although the right-hand section of the mural is the most severely damaged, one may make out a single black bird flying horizontally above the women, who are attired in simply-rendered dresses of burnished red, yellow, and deep blue (Fig. 5). Their fair-colored hair is pulled back to the nape of their necks and falls down their backs. The two central figures link arms as the woman in red gestures affectionately to her friend. At the foot of the tree is a table or bed and above this is the faint outline of a serpentine figure, both barely visible due to the mural's poor state of preservation.

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<sup>2</sup> An inaugural plaque located on the exterior of the fountain confirms the date the fountain was completed. The plaque reads: *Hec res scito, legens, annis sub mille ducentis et sexaginta quinque peracta fuit, annis ut fiat indictio consona iuncta tunc erat octaua. Qui legis ista, scias Ildibrandinus de Pisis quando potestas huius erat terra pluris honoris eques.*

<sup>3</sup> Similar in style to the Fonte dell'Abbondanza in Massa Marittima are the Fontebranda in Siena (completed 1246) and the Fonte di Docciola in Volterra (completed 1244-5).

The mural is balanced on the viewer's left side by another group of four women similarly dressed, perhaps a 'later' version of the four, on the right (Fig. 6).<sup>4</sup> Although the two groups' hair and dress are stylistically similar, the left side's idyllic scene is juxtaposed with an image of chaos and discord as not one but four birds frantically fly above the women. Instead of linking arms in a harmonious gesture, the two women in red and blue on the right violently tear at each other's disheveled hair and fight over a disproportionately large phallus. In their frenzy, an overturned water jug falls forgotten to their feet. The other woman in red stands demurely, with her hands behind her back, while being discretely sodomized by an errant phallus. Finally, the woman in yellow wears a slight smile as she pokes upward with a stick at a barely visible bird's nest.

The mural's iconography alludes to a rich and complex tradition of both pagan and Christian imagery. Within the repertoire of pagan symbolism and literature—which I will argue was still firmly embedded within the community of Massa Marittima and other areas of Tuscany well into the thirteenth century—the phallus, serpent, and bird functioned as talismanic symbols of auspiciousness and fertility. The phallus was an ancient symbol with its own intrinsic generative power, embodying the ideals of both virility and fertility. Like the two opposing groups of women in the mural, the phallus had the potential to be both benign and malevolent, either blessing community with a harvest to sustain them throughout the winter or causing them to suffer famine and disease. The serpent, too, had a supernatural meaning for the Ancients. Due to its ability to survive both above and below ground, the serpent became a symbolic link between the land of the dead and the land of the living and

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<sup>4</sup> Ferzoco, 73.

thus became associated with ideas of prophetic knowledge and magical healing powers.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, birds, like the ones hovering above the women's heads, also functioned as agents in ancient practices of augury, linking them to the overall theme of fertility, propitiousness, and mystic knowledge.

Perhaps the strongest iconographic tie to antiquity is the conspicuous depiction of women as the embodiment of wantonness and discord. The gender anxiety that was deeply rooted in Greek philosophical texts was still very much present in the medieval world. Not only, as I will argue, were the lingering pagan beliefs in more rural societies still firmly embedded in the population's consciousness,<sup>6</sup> but the resurrected scholastic interest in Aristotelian texts by the Church and newly formed universities further categorized 'woman' as a threatening and 'Other'. Like the phallus and the serpent, beliefs of women as sexual, seductive prophetesses whose mysterious links to fertility and the earth could either sustain or destroy society, were a feared power that needed to be exorcized or controlled.<sup>7</sup>

When this pagan symbolism is interpreted within its contemporary medieval Christian context, the mural's complex meaning becomes even more ambiguous. The phallus and the serpent may no longer be read as apotropaic signs of fertility and knowledge:

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<sup>5</sup> Silvio Bernardini, *The Serpent and the Siren: Sacred and Enigmatic Images in Tuscan Rural Churches*, trans. Kate Singelton (Siena: San Quirico d'Oricia, 2000), 23-26.

<sup>6</sup> Bernardini supports my assertion, stating, "In peasant society, earlier myths and beliefs tended to persist even in the face of radical historical and social change" (28).

<sup>7</sup> Their artistic placement as decoration on a source of water further solidifies their association with pagan beliefs of magic and ritual, much like the fountain recently uncovered on the Via Flaminia in Rome that was dedicated to Anna Perenna, a Roman goddess associated with water, magic, and the moon. See Marina Piranomonte, *Il Santuario della Musica e il Bosco Sacro di Anna Perenna* (Milan: Una realizzazione editoriale di Mondadori Electa S.p.A., 2002).

they are the Christian symbols of sin, evil, and temptation. Furthermore, if the women's juxtaposition on either side of the tree is read as an allegory of good and evil within the Christian context, they become equated with the paradigmatic examples of female vice and virtue: Eve and Mary.

This thesis explores the effect of the enduring pagan traditions evident in contemporary texts and iconographies of the thirteenth century community of Massa Marittima, as well as how these beliefs influenced the reading of the mural for the medieval viewer. By considering how the Christian church reappropriated the images present in the mural, as well as its context within a secular and public work of art, the mural becomes a metonymic device that illuminates the complex beliefs, anxieties, and traditions of a community whose amalgamative art work reveals both ties to the classical past as well as the Christian present.

## CHAPTER II

### LA FONTE DELL' ABBONDANZA?

*Heu, quam longe ab isto fructu misericordiam, et terrena  
non concupiscentium, sunt animae avororum!*

[Alas, by the anxiety, wealth, and indulgence in this life,  
they are choked; they bear no fruit!]<sup>8</sup>

#### Tuscany in the Duecento

An understanding of the history and politics of medieval Italy is necessary in order to comprehend the mural's interpretation by a contemporary viewer, as well as its more complex role within the realm of civic and politicized art. The twelfth century in Italy began to see the rise of independent city-states. These individual republics with their own armies and governments developed against a backdrop of intense rivalry between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Papacy that raged through Germany and Italy during this period. Loyalties fell either to the Guelphs (the Papacy faction) or the Ghibellines (the Holy Roman Emperor faction). Complex alliances and rivalries arose between the more powerful Italian states, such as Ferrara, Florence, Mantua, Milan, Naples, and Siena (to name a few), with each state determining its loyalty according to the best way to protect its own borders and sovereignty.

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<sup>8</sup> Bonaventure, *Speculum Mariae Beatae Virginiae*, vol. 14, 287, translated by A. Derbes; M. Sandona and A. Derbes, "Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb: The Program of Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (1998), 281.



The city-state of Massa Marittima was small compared to the dukedoms and republics that were developing across the north of Italy, but Massa Marittima was able to retain its independence through a unique and lucrative source. While some other Italian city-states, such as Florence and Venice, grew rich on banking or textiles, Massa Marittima held a firm monopoly on a variety of raw minerals that were imbedded in the town's surrounding hills. Anyone wishing to purchase minerals such as gold, lead, and ore were forced to do business with Massa Marittima, which at the time was a major mining center in the Italian peninsula. Not only did this bring great wealth and prestige to the small town, but it also caused the *comune* to become a highly contested region that both the Guelphs and Ghibellines desired to control.<sup>9</sup> At the time the Fonte dell'Abbondanza was completed in 1265, a Pro-Ghibelline faction controlled the city under the *podestà* Ildibrandino Malcondine da Pisa. Only a year later, in 1266, the Ghibellines were defeated by the Guelphs at the Battle of Benevento on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February.<sup>10</sup>

After the bishop relinquished his power to the citizens in 1225, Massa Marittima entered into its most prosperous era as an independent *comune*.<sup>11</sup> Although constant internal strife raged among rival families and individuals who fought to ally themselves with other Tuscan cities, construction of civic architecture and art continued to flourish. Within the

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<sup>9</sup> Massa Marittima retained its independence from 1225 until 1335 when invading forces from Siena were able to capture and annex the town.

<sup>10</sup> Comune di Massa Marittima and Soprintendenza per I Beni Artistici e Storici di Siena e Grosseto, *Massa Marittima. L'albero della fecondità*, Massa Marittima (2000), 4-16; Adrian S. Hoch, "Duecento Fertility Imagery for Females at Massa Marittima's Public Fountain," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 69, no. 4 (2006), 476.

<sup>11</sup> Ferzoco, 71.

thirteenth century, the Fonte dell'Abbondanza, a cathedral, town hall, marketplace, headquarters of the *podestà*, and many prominent families' palazzi were built.

Massa Marittima's social, artistic, and political fate was closely tied to its powerful neighbor to the north—Siena. Like Massa Marittima, Siena experienced an internal crisis when the Ghibelline government was exiled after the Battle of Benevento in February of 1266.<sup>12</sup> From 1270 on into the early fourteenth century, Siena, along with Massa Marittima, embraced Guelphism as its foreign policy. Although Massa Marittima retained its political autonomy as a *comune*, Sienese influence still manifested itself in Massa Marittima's art and architecture.<sup>13</sup> Before Massa Marittima was officially annexed by Siena in 1335, three significant known works of art were commissioned by the Massa Marittian government from Siena. Duccio's workshop produced a Marian altarpiece, the *Madonna della Grazie*, for the town's cathedral (1316), Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted an altarpiece for the Church of Sant' Agostino (ca. 1335), and Goro di Gregorio sculpted the tomb of Saint Cerbone (1324).<sup>14</sup> It is during these constantly changing and tempestuous historical developments that the Massa Marittima Mural was created.

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<sup>12</sup> Dante, *Purgatorio*, vi, 76-7: *Ahi serve Italia, di dolore ostello, nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta*. [Ah! servile Italy, grief's hostelry! A ship without a pilot in great tempest!]

<sup>13</sup> Diana Norman, *Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 107-9.

<sup>14</sup> Enzo Carli, *L'Arte a Massa Marittima* (Siena: Pubblicato a Cura dell'Amministrazione Comunale e del Rotary Club di Massa Marittima, 1976).

## Deconstructing the Mural

For a town to have a central water source within the walls of the civic center in the thirteenth century was an extraordinary technological advancement. The completion of the Fonte dell'Abbondanza in 1265 replaced the Fonte di Bufalona, Massa Marittima's previous main water source located outside the walls of the city. The knowledge to gather and channel the water into the town most likely came from Massa Marittima's advanced knowledge of mining techniques, their main source of revenue. The in-town water source not only protected Massa Marittima from the threat of a siege (by far one of the most effective invasion techniques was to besiege a town and gain control of its water supply), it also provided the people with a central gathering place inside the town. Thus, any decoration on the fountain located in this centralized and much-viewed location would have been carefully selected and designed.

The placement of the mural on the rear wall of the Fonte dell'Abbondanza reveals its key importance. In this highly-visited area of the town, it would have been seen by a wide audience. The commission of such a prominent (and no doubt costly) project to decorate the fountain was not an accident or coincidence, and the detailed layers of meaning within the iconography of the mural have been overlooked until recently. Numerous interpretations of the mural have been proposed. Alessandro Bagnoli, the director of the mural's restoration, as well as scholar Adrian Hoch, have suggested that the mural was created in tandem with the construction of the fountain in 1265, thus linking its Pro-Ghibelline iconography to fertility and prosperity.<sup>15</sup> Like the water in the fountain that the tree springs from, both elements of nature are givers of life and sustenance. Hoch further postulates that the mural's

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<sup>15</sup> Hoch, 471-88.

promotion of human fecundity is complemented by the relief sculptures of male and female sex organs that decorate the corbels and pendentives of the fountain's exterior.<sup>16</sup> Within a medieval context, the phalli that hang from the branches of the tree would lack the obscene connotations of modern times and instead function as talismanic symbols of good luck and protection from evil. Mario Ascheri, a historian of medieval and renaissance Siena, links the presence of human reproductive organs to a continued association in medieval culture of water and public fountains with ancient fertility rites.<sup>17</sup>

Hoch further argues that the birds in the mural act as a double entendre with the phalli they fly around.<sup>18</sup> One black bird flies horizontally over the heads of the four women standing to the viewer's right of the tree, who are perhaps harvesting "fertility" crops and do not view the hovering bird as a threat. The poor condition of the mural makes it hard to reproduce the scene, but Hoch posits that like the women who would come to the fountain and view the mural, the women in the fresco are taking an active role in the reproduction of future generations. The women on the left side, in contrast, are interacting aggressively with the four birds flying overhead. One woman (the second from the left) pokes a stick upward,

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<sup>16</sup> Hoch, 477.

<sup>17</sup> Mario Ascheri, *Lo spazio storico di Siena* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2001): 146; The Roman fountain dedicated to Anna Perenna near the Via Flaminia, for example, tied the source of water to this goddess associated with fertility, the harvest, the moon, and the new year. Anna Perenna, who was reincarnated as a water nymph after she drowned in the River Numicus while trying to escape the jealousy of Lavinia, derived her new name from the Latin *amnis perennis*, or perennial stream. See Ovid *Fasti* 3.523f; Piranomonte, *Il Santuario della Musica e il Bosco Sacro di Anna Perenna*.

<sup>18</sup> Hoch, 479-81. The Italian word for bird, *uccello*, carried with it phallic connotations and was often used interchangeably within a ludic context.

possibly trying to disperse the crows in order to protect the masculine life force that she is trying to create.<sup>19</sup>

This interpretation has numerous problems. Ferzoco discredits this fertility theory by focusing on the women on the left side of the mural. He states in a 2005 interview:

We have an image of two women who appear to be locked in serious combat over one of these phalli, so this supposed fertility symbol that ought to bring life and goodness is in fact bringing strife to the people fighting over it. More importantly, there is a woman on the left side of the mural, standing in what I call her “Lady Di” pose, standing quite demurely, until you realize that she’s being sodomized by one of these phalli. You can’t get pregnant by sodomy: it’s the ultimate in non-fertility. There’s something going on in the mural that subverts notions of fertility.<sup>20</sup>

Not only are the women participating in inappropriate activities with the phalli, the rendering of the phalli as fruits of the tree gives an unnatural feeling to the mural. Just as the phalli are causing the women to engage in harmful acts, the tree is not bearing the correct and natural kind of fruit. This leaves the viewer not with an idea of fertility, but with an uncomfortable sense of strangeness in the presence of these “unnatural fruits.”

The birds, Ferzoco continues, may be specifically identified as eagles, the symbol of the Ghibelline party, and would have been widely recognized as such by the medieval viewer.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the intended message becomes clear:

The juxtaposition of this party symbol along with another symbol being used unnaturally, in a non-fertile way is meant to create in the viewer a kind of relationship between what is unnatural or not good on the one hand and the Ghibelline party on the other. It makes even more sense when you consider

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<sup>19</sup> Hoch, 481.

<sup>20</sup> A. Lawless, “From Fertility Symbol to Political Propaganda: Decoding the Massa Marittima Mural,” *Three Monkeys Art Magazine* (April 2005), 2.

<sup>21</sup> The flag of the Holy Roman Empire contained a two-headed black eagle.

that during almost all of its history as an independent city republic, Massa Marittima was controlled by the anti-Ghibelline Guelph party.<sup>22</sup>

With this information, the mural takes on an entirely new meaning. The strangely placed phalli, the Ghibelline eagles, and the women who are engaged in unnatural and malicious acts provide a warning of the evilness, immorality, and unnaturalness that would permeate Massa Marittima if the Ghibellines (represented by the eagles) took control of the town. Because of Massa Marittima's rich natural resources and central location, the strategically-placed mural supporting the Papal Guelph faction makes the work of art unique not only in what it represents, but also in the way it portrays its intended message.

Ferzoco's interpretation also causes a reconsideration of Hoch and Bagnoli's original dating of the mural to 1265, contemporary with the completion of the fountain and during the period in which Massa Marittima was still under the influence of a Ghibelline *podestà*.<sup>23</sup> Bagnoli cites stylistic evidence in comparison, noting the similarity in the women's dress in the mural to *San Giovanni Battista in trono e storie della sua vita*, a painting he attributes to an unidentified Sienese artist active in the mid-thirteenth century.<sup>24</sup> He further compares the women's faces, hairstyles, and clothes to the work of Pisan artist, Giunta Capitini (active until 1254), or one of his followers who were commissioned to work in nearby Massa Marittima.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lawless, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Hoch, 477; Comune di Massa Marittima, 8.

<sup>24</sup> The painting is conserved in Siena, Pinacoteca nazionale as painting number 14.

<sup>25</sup> Comune di Massa Marittima, 8. The crucifixes by Capitini that Bagnoli uses for comparison are preserved in Pisa's Museo Nazionale di San Matteo and Bologna's Church of San Domenico.

Ferzoco posits a later dating of the mural, between approximately 1270 and the beginning of the fourteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Although only slightly later than the originally proposed date, accepting the later date would result in the rejection of the interpretation of the mural as an allusion to Ghibelline prosperity and fertility. To support this hypothesis, Ferzoco again turns to the women's dress. He states that the clothing's "elegant simplicity, their slight bulkiness and in particular their high waistlines" are in fact closer in style to the figures in Giotto's *Marriage of the Virgin* in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (ca. 1304) and that the women's faces in fact more closely resemble those in Memmo di Filippuccio's *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1290).<sup>27</sup>

### The Fertile Virgin

A barely visible image of a veiled woman holding a lily (not only a symbol of Mary's innocence, but also an attribute of the civic emblem of Guelph-controlled Florence), which has been identified as the Virgin Mary fills the central bay of the back wall of the Fonte dell' Abbondanza, directly to the viewer's right of the Tree of Fertility (Fig. 7).<sup>28</sup> Amid a background of green and blue floral decoration, the figure is posed frontally and directly engages the viewer. One can only speculate whether the image is contemporary

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<sup>26</sup> Ferzoco, 75-6.

<sup>27</sup> Ferzoco, 76-77, writes, "Both of these works are from the first years of the Trecento, and would serve as chronological *terminus ad quem*...On such historical and stylistic grounds, I believe this Mural was painted in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, or, at the latest, the beginning of the Trecento; within this period, it is more likely to have been produced in the earlier years."

<sup>28</sup> Ferzoco, 83-4; Diana Norman, *Siena, Florence, and Padua: Art, Society, and Religion, 1280-1400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 149.

with the Tree of Fertility mural; in any case, the juxtaposition of Mary, a well-known symbol of fecundity, with the arboreal image of *infertility* warrants further attention.<sup>29</sup>

Contributing to the evidence of Sienese influence (and therefore Guelph patronage) over the art of Massa Marittima in the late Duecento and early Trecento is the inclusion of Mary in the fountain's artistic program. The Sienese had long viewed Mary as an exceptional and special protector of their city, and her cult worship only increased after the Sienese victory over Florence at the Battle of Montaperti in 1260 was credited to the divine intercession of the Virgin. Although historical accounts of the events have been under scrutiny by scholars (the earliest surviving dates only to the fifteenth century), there may be little doubt as to the power the Virgin held in the minds of the Sienese people.<sup>30</sup> She was soon after adopted as the official patron and protector of Siena, and her image was embraced and rapidly reproduced in the late Duecento not only in religious contexts, but also as a civic iconographic emblem.<sup>31</sup>

By the late Middle Ages, the belief of the salvational powers of Mary's womb was well established for Christians.<sup>32</sup> As an intercessor for the sinner, Mary's supernatural fertility produced the savior of the human race and is reflected in the devotional literature of

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<sup>29</sup> Although Ferzoco does not conclusively date the image in the central bay to be contemporary with the Tree of Fertility Mural, he offers a date of no later than the early Trecento based on the stylistic rendering of the figure's veil (84).

<sup>30</sup> Diana Norman, *Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval City State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 3-6.

<sup>31</sup> Christine Heal, "Civitas Virginis," in *Art, Politics, and Civic Religion in Central Italy, 1261-1352*, ed. Joanna Cannon and Beth Williamson (Cambridge, Eng.: University Press, 2000), 299.

<sup>32</sup> Sandona, 281.



the period. Bonaventure, the thirteenth century Franciscan philosopher who was canonized in 1588, describes the metaphoric nature of the Virgin's womb: "The 'fruit' is not simply of the womb [referring to Christ], but of the mind."<sup>33</sup> Mary's power lies in her promise of salvation through repentance, awareness, humility, and moderation—all the qualities that women in the Tree of Fertility mural lack.

The Tree of Fertility mural is not the only locus where the theme of fertility is addressed in the late Due- and early Trecento. The rise of depictions of Hell and the Apocalypse in Italian Last Judgments (which will be addressed further in the following chapter) illustrates several instances in which punishment is linked to infertility. Both the Arena Chapel in Padua by Giotto (1304-6) and the Last Judgment mosaic in the Florentine Baptistery (c. 1270-80) depict a gluttonous Satan participating in demonic inversions of fecundity.<sup>34</sup> In Giotto's depiction of Satan, a human emerges head first from his bloated lower half in a perverse and ironic depiction of pregnancy. Men and women around both Satans are sexually tortured in graphic scenes: in Padua, one man's genitals are being gnawed off by a demon, while in Florence another man is being sodomized at Satan's feet.

Contemporary Italian literature further compliments the ideas of infertility and sin depicted in the Last Judgments. Both St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, and Dante, in his *Inferno*, cite sodomy and all other forms of unnatural sexuality as a grievous sin against nature (*peccata contra naturam*).<sup>35</sup> The juxtaposition of Mary's fertile womb as

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<sup>33</sup> Bonaventure, *Speculum Mariae Beatae Virginiae*, vol. 14, 285, in the chapter entitled *Fructus ventris Beatae Mariae quorum sit, et quibus debeatur*: "*Fructus namque iste non solum est fructus ventris, sed etiam mentis.*"

<sup>34</sup> Sandona, 284-5.

<sup>35</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Cantos 15-16; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, 3a.70.2 .

a tool of salvation with infertility as a product of the Devil creates a clear link between the medieval ideas of sin, infertility, and excess that was evident in both literature and art during the period the mural was conceived. These links support the hypothesis that the incorrectly named Tree of Fertility mural is in fact a depiction of *infertility*, with the complementary representation of the Virgin as a widely understood icon of fertility and salvation only further serving to highlight the different message the women under the tree are communicating to the viewer.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE *RISUS SAPIENTIAE*: SEXUALITY AND THE DANGERS OF FEMALE KNOWLEDGE

τῇι μὲν ὕδωρ ἐφόρει  
δολοφρονέουσα χειρὶ, θῆτέρι δὲ πῦρ.

[She came carrying water in one hand,  
the tricky-minded female, and fire in the other.]<sup>36</sup>

Beginning in the thirteenth century, Europe experienced numerous political, commercial, and social changes that propelled medieval culture into the beginnings of the Renaissance.<sup>37</sup> Due in part to the rise of secular wealth in a budding merchant class, the consolidation of power by many European monarchs, and the threat of scholasticism by several newly founded universities, the Church began to struggle with numerous issues of faith, sin, and redemption. Priests were under reproach for their questionable morals, and the vast wealth of the Church's coffers drew criticism from its once faithful followers. Apologist theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, looked to antique sources for answers. For these philosophers, their search expanded beyond Christian doctrines of the early Church fathers: beginning in the mid-twelfth century, Greek and Arabic texts began to be widely translated into Latin. Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle

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<sup>36</sup>Archilochos, *Iambi et Elegi Graeci*, vol. 1., ed. M. L. West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 70.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Siebold, ed., *The 1200's* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2001), 13-19.

and Neo-Platonists such as Plotinus considerably re-shaped the beliefs of Christian thinkers.<sup>38</sup> Thomas Aquinas effectively re-appropriated and “Christianized” Aristotelian logic for the benefit of the Church, including the idea that women were an imperfect form of men, subject to them due to man’s greater abundance of reason.

With this dramatic dispersal of knowledge and renewed love for learning came a revitalized interest in the arts as well. Italy, especially, gave birth to masters such as Cimabue, Giotto, and Duccio; Dante also composed his *Divine Comedy* in vernacular Italian, a dramatic departure from previous scholastic texts being written in Latin that made the work more accessible to the *hoi polloi*.<sup>39</sup> The art these men produced greatly reflected not only the theological anxieties and internal crises that the Church was experiencing, but perhaps more importantly, they provided a window into the everyday beliefs and life of the late medieval population.

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<sup>38</sup> Siebold, 18; Sandona, 277; John Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch, 1216-1380* (New York: Longman, 1980), 239.

<sup>39</sup> According to Giorgio Vasari’s book, *The Lives of the Artists*, Duccio was active in Siena (1255/60-1315/19), the period in which Massa Marittima was greatly under the artistic influence of Siena. Cimabue was a Florentine painter (c. 1240-1302), and the teacher of Giotto (1266/7-1337), about whom Lorenzo Ghiberti also comments: “Giotto saw in art what others had not attained...He was extremely skillful in all the arts and was the inventor and discoverer of many methods which had been buried for about six hundred years.” See L. Ghiberti. “I Commentari,” in *A Documentary History of Art*, trans. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, in *The Creators*, Daniel J. Boorstin, (New York: Random House, 1992), 382.

### Luxuria:

One particular subject of painting that rose in popularity was the Last Judgment.<sup>40</sup> Although executed in different cities and by different artists, the compositional elements remain largely the same: an enthroned Christ is situated in the center, surrounded by his twelve apostles and various saints; Christ gestures beneficently to his right as the saved mortals rise towards heaven. The Edenic scene of salvation is violently juxtaposed with the condemnation of the damned on Christ's left, where the horrific punishments described in Dante's *Inferno* are illustrated with piercing detail. In these depictions of Hell, the nature of the sin determines the course of punishment.<sup>41</sup>

Although depictions of men in Last Judgment scenes may be differentiated by their position in the medieval social hierarchy, by their occupation, or by the nature of their sin, women are grouped exclusively on the basis of their sex.<sup>42</sup> Not only are women relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy and the margins of the frame in the portrayals of Heaven, they are even more segregated within the bowels of Hell. Furthermore, the reason for their banishment into Hell falls under the all-encompassing sin of *luxuria*, which Grötecke defines as “a frame of reference within which the sensuality of women, their concern with

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<sup>40</sup> For pertinent surviving examples of Italian Last Judgment scenes from the Due- and Trecento, see the ceiling mosaic in the Florentine Baptistery (1250-70), S. Pellegrino in Bominaco (1263), Santa Maria *ad Cryptas* in Fosse (1280-90), S. Cecelia in Trastevere by Pietro Cavallini (1293), Arena Chapel by Giotto (1304-6), Santa Croce, Florence by Orcagna (1340's), Capella Strozzi, Santa Maria Novella in Florence by Nardo di Cione (1350-60), and the Baptistery at Pisa.

<sup>41</sup> Iris Grötecke, “Representing the Last Judgment: Social Hierarchy, Gender, and Sin,” *The Medieval History Journal* 1:2 (1998), 249-50.

<sup>42</sup> Grötecke, 248-9.

their own physicality (in the sense of vanity), as well as the act of sexual intercourse itself, are all related to each other and are defined as sin.”<sup>43</sup>

In the fragmented remains of the fresco at Santa Croce, an entwined couple huddles beneath the banner of *Luxuria*, and the Pisan Last Judgment shows a detail of women attired in expensive dresses with their hair tied back in long braids being attacked by several devilish figures. In the Arena Chapel Last Judgment, a nude woman is hung by her braid next to a couple similarly suspended by their sexual organs; the close proximity highlights the connection between the body and sexual sin (Fig. 8). Serpents (symbols of seduction, evil, and sexuality) entwine a woman who is depicted as a child-murderess in S. Pellegrino in Bominaco. Finally, the description of a woman as a *meretrix* (prostitute) appears in Santa Maria ad cryptes and synthesizes the medieval belief that not only was prostitution an exclusively female vice, but it was also synonymous with a woman’s ability to seduce an unwitting male.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the misogynistic depictions of female sin in Last Judgment scenes of this period portray women as beings who bewitch the minds and bodies of unsuspecting men. They are equally guilty of the sin *luxuria*, which manifests itself “in the form of vanity and seduction [and implies] an exaggerated preoccupation with the body (instead of the more valuable soul), as an undeniably female vice.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Grötecke, 252.

<sup>44</sup> Grötecke, 256.

<sup>45</sup> Grötecke, 255.

Mind:

Women's reputations as herbalists and healers with knowledge beyond men's comprehension were viewed with fear, as scholar Silvio Bernardini explains:

Throughout the millennia many different religions would seem to have encompassed an essentially heretical line of mythical and mystic knowledge of which women are the source and vehicle. Men have always viewed this with fear, doing their utmost to exorcise it. From the Great Mother to Eve, there has been a common thread linking this kind of intrinsically female knowledge to the 'Earth that nurtures,' as Homer put it.<sup>46</sup>

Hesiod writes of the Graeae in his *Theogony*: the hideous monsters that were born as white-haired old women to Phorcys by Ceto.<sup>47</sup> The three sisters—Deino, Enyo, and Pemphredo—shared one tooth and one eye between them, and they were given the gift of foreknowledge to make up for their ugliness. They are often compared to the Moirae, the Fates, who controlled the metaphoric thread of life for both gods and mortals.<sup>48</sup> These females were also born of immortal blood and reputed to be the offspring of Zeus and Themis.<sup>49</sup> Both the Graeae and the Moirae, and even the mortal Trojan princess Cassandra, represented the psychological anxieties in the Greek male mind of the threatening 'Other' because of their ability to foresee and influence the future—an uneasiness that had resurfaced in the Middle Ages and manifested itself in the fear of a witch's reputed fortune-telling abilities. These

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<sup>46</sup>Bernardini, 65.

<sup>47</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 270-4.

<sup>48</sup> Clotho (Roman name, Nona) was the spinner of the thread and was also associated with the protection of pregnant women during their final months before labor. Lachesis (Roman name, Decima) measured the woven thread, and Atropos (Roman name, Morta) not only chose the manner of a person's death, but also decided at what time one died when she cut his/her thread of life. Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawford, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 589-90.

<sup>49</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, xiv.334, xxiv.49; *Odyssey*, vii.197.

prophetesses were neither fully women nor beast, and their inability to fit into the logical Greek binary categories of man/woman, good/evil, same/other led them to be considered the most extreme and threatening form of female deviance.

The Graeae have an intimate connection with another significant figure of mythical influence: Medusa. Medusa was born a mortal girl and punished by a jealous Athena when she was found being raped by Poseidon in her temple. Athena turned her into a gorgon, a monstrous creature with snakes for hair, scales on her breast, large wings, and a gaze that turned mortals to stone by its sheer hideousness.<sup>50</sup> The Graeae were forced by Perseus to reveal Medusa and her two gorgon sisters' whereabouts after he stole their one eye. Perseus then tracked down Medusa and slew the wretched creature, avoiding her stoning gaze with a mirror. Medusa's mystifying gaze took on an apotropaic function in ancient myth and art. Athena bore an image of the gorgon on her aegis as a means of warding off evil and protecting herself from threatening forces. Furthermore, Medusa's image served as a protector of temples, often appearing on archaic pedimental sculptures with her pendulous tongue and wild snaky hair.<sup>51</sup> Just as Medusa's gaze evoked fear and coerced the viewer, so too did the medieval witch's mental powers subordinate the bodily senses of the helpless male.

The Sirens of Homeric myth are perhaps the greatest incarnation of the dangers presented by females who profess to "know too much." Just as the serpent promised Eve

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<sup>50</sup> Lucan, *Bellum civile*, ix.624-684; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, iv.774-785, 790-801.

<sup>51</sup> John Boardman, *Greek Sculpture, the Archaic Period* (New York: Thames and London, 1991).



that “your eyes will be opened,”<sup>52</sup> the knowledge of the Siren’s pledge to Odysseus and his men is seductive and dangerous:

‘Come here,’ they sang, ‘renowned Ulysses, honor to the Achaean name, and listen to our two voices. No one ever sailed past us without staying to hear the enchanting sweetness of our song—and he who listens will go on his way not only charmed, but wiser, for we know all the ills that the gods laid upon the Argives and the Trojans before Troy, and can tell you everything that is going to happen in the whole world.’<sup>53</sup>

Although the female’s ability to bewitch men’s minds often proved a deadly art in and of itself, her alluring knowledge was only one half of her means to seduce a male. A woman’s seductive body proved equally as dangerous a tool.

#### Body:

While Medusa, the Graeae, the Moriae, and the Sirens came to represent the cognitive powers a witch possessed, there are also many mythological women who symbolized the witch’s equally dangerous carnal and seductive nature. Like the two-faced Roman god Janus, the medieval witch was viewed to have a dual personality—a view formed from the ancient philosophical dichotomies set forth most famously by Aristotle.<sup>54</sup> Scholar Lorenzo Lorenzi references Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, and proposes that in the body of the medieval witch were the conflated dualistic qualities of the Apollonian (civilization) and Dionysian (primal nature) spirits.<sup>55</sup> Medusa and the Graeae represent the

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<sup>52</sup> Genesis 3:5.

<sup>53</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, xii, 184-191.

<sup>54</sup> See Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, trans. L. A. Peck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>55</sup> Lorenzo Lorenzi, *Witches: Exploring the Iconography of the Sorceress and Enchantress*.

Dionysian side, as their abilities to seduce and bewitch through mental cunningness were associated with *thanatos* (death), destruction, uncontrolled emotion, primal instinct, and excess.

The classical figure that embodied the Apollonian side was Lamia, the mythic Queen of Libya turned child-murdering demon after being driven mad by grief when Hera jealously murdered all of her children by Zeus.<sup>56</sup> Lamia's characteristics as a child-eating, blood-thirsty monster were incorporated into medieval depictions of deviant and sinful women, as in the depiction of the child-murderess in Santa Maria ad cryptes mentioned previously in the chapter.

Scholar Anne Carson examines the ancient Greek roots of gender anxiety that remained present in medieval culture.<sup>57</sup> According to Aristotle, a woman's moral inferiority and her association with the flesh may be attributed to her inferior biological status. Women were wet, contaminated, and dirty, which in turn made them formless, unbounded, and the distinct opposite of men.<sup>58</sup> Hippokrates and Plato support Aristotle's assumption by elucidating the theory of the "wandering womb," and speculated that this female organ was the reason for hysteria and wantonness.<sup>59</sup> While men were considered dry, the epitome of

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trans. Ursula Creagh (Florence: Centro Di, 2005), 33-5.

<sup>56</sup> See "Lamia" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 812.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place: Women, Dirt, and Desire," *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. by D. M. Halperin, J. J. Winkler, and F. I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990): 135-169.

<sup>58</sup> Hippokrates, *Vict.* 27; Aristotle, *Probl.* 4.25.879a33-34; cf. 4.28.88a12-20. Carson defines dirt as "matter out of place; dirt is matter that has crossed a boundary it ought not to have crossed (158)."

<sup>59</sup> Hippokrates, *de Morb. Mul.*, 1.7; Plato, *Tim.* 91c.

restraint, *sophrosyne* (wisdom), and stability, women were especially susceptible to emotions and uncontrollable sexuality due to their liquefying and porous nature. The moisture that is present in all women not only leads to a diminished intelligence (Aristotle writes that all women have the undeveloped souls of children),<sup>60</sup> but more dangerously a predilection toward *eros* and eroticism. This unbridled sexuality that was at its height in an unmarried yet sexually mature *parthenos* (maiden) needed to be restrained and controlled, not only for the protection of the father or husband's *oikos* (household), but more importantly for the preservation of the *polis* (city) as a whole. For the Greeks, the way to control a woman was through marriage, the final step in the taming process of a woman that first was begun with female puberty rites.<sup>61</sup> By “breaking in” the woman through sex at the end of the marriage ritual, her wild and threatening sexuality was effectively suppressed and controlled; she became an acceptable addition to the husband's *oikos*. Even the ancient Greek verb “to marry” (*damazein*) carries connotations of seducing, conquering, and subduing; it also may be translated as “to tame” or “to break in” when referring to animals, or “to plow” the female body as one plants seeds in the Earth. Etymologically, there is little difference in the mind of the Greeks between a wild animal and an unmarried maiden.<sup>62</sup> The

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<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b.

<sup>61</sup> J. E. Robson, “Bestiality and Bestial Rape in Greek Myth,” *Rape in Antiquity*, ed. Susan Decay and Faren F. Pierce (London: Duckworth in association with The Classical Press of Wales, 1997), 77.

<sup>62</sup> The idea of *plowing* the female body finds literary reference in Pindar's *Pythian Ode* 4, in which he associates the sexual intercourse of Medea and Jason with the act of plowing: On that eventful day or in the nights of love/ the seed of your greatness fell/in foreign furrows.../for then it was that Euphamos' race/ was sown to endure forever...(4.254-57). See also, Page du Bois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

women in the mural, like the *parthenos*, are threatening because they are young and beautiful yet also sexually mature.

Due to her “wild” nature, the *parthenos* was often associated with Diana, a goddess of nature and the moon with connections to the female body, menstruation, childbirth, and fertility. The connections between females, Diana, nature, and a sacred knowledge of the Earth remained strong in Europe long after the dissolution of pagan beliefs. John of Salisbury (1120-1180) was the first to record a witches’ cult dedicated to the worship of the goddess Diana and Jewish princess Herodias, the seductive and evil wife of Herod Antipas.<sup>63</sup> Begun in the tenth century and well known in medieval folklore by the twelfth century when John of Salisbury was writing, the Church—although reticent to admit that such a cult was not merely a fabricated product of superstitious anxieties—still treated the idea with caution. Known as the Tuscan *tregenda*, it was believed that women were joined by Diana, Herodias, and demons, who taught their followers skills pertaining to herbs and magic.<sup>64</sup> The Diana-Herodian cult that John of Salisbury refers to had its roots in the secret pagan Bacchic rituals of maenads whose all-female cults worshipped the god of wine through dance and sexual ecstasy. Early Christian even referenced the Bacchantes to

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<sup>63</sup> John of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres, France mentions the cult in his book, *Polycraticus*, ed. Murray F. Markland (New York: F. Unger Pub. Co., 1979), Book 2:101, referring to the figure of Herodias as *Noctiluca*, or queen of the night. The Gospel of Mark 6:20 records that Herodias was instrumental in the death of John the Baptist, coaxing her daughter, Salome, to dance seductively for her father and request the head of John as a prize. For further reading on the Diana-Herodias Cult, see also Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the witches' sabbath* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), 103-104.

<sup>64</sup> Larner, 169.

demonize Romans as practitioners of a sexually perverse pagan religion.<sup>65</sup> At first consideration, the pairing of a Greek goddess with a Jewish mortal seems odd and unrelated, but both spoke to the medieval concern of the ‘Other’. While Diana, the untamed virginal goddess represented the patriarchy’s fear of feminine sexual deviance, Herodias came to represent the fears of heretical sects that were forming throughout Europe. Like the almost mirror-like construction of the women in the Massa Marittima Mural, the ancient view of women that continued to permeate medieval thought was the belief that she possessed a dualistic nature. While one part contained cognitive powers of seduction (like the scheming Herodias), the other bewitched the body through mystic connections to the earth, the moon, and fertility (Diana).

Anne Carson’s description of ancient women as physically contaminated and biologically inferior was not limited to medieval folklore anxieties, but is referenced in both secular and religious literature. Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), for example, prohibited women from touching altars, linens, or sacred vessels due to their inherent bodily pollution. Bonaventure, also, viewed women as sexually dangerous and cited marriage as a necessary ill in order to prevent extra-marital affairs.<sup>66</sup> His fear was additionally reflected in the misogynistic literature of the medieval period: in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, the author comments extensively on the widely held belief that upper class women be detained and

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<sup>65</sup> Catherine Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 187: “The fantasy of a secret sect that had orgies and murdered babies goes back to the Roman images of the Christians and was applied in the Middle Ages to heretics and Jews, but other parts of the image seem to be derived from folk beliefs, such as the idea of flying supernatural beings.”

<sup>66</sup> Larner, 70.

secluded, and Paolo da Certaldo further elucidates the constant anxiety of a family being dishonored by a woman's essential sexual weakness. He reminds husbands:

The female is an empty thing and easily swayed; she runs great risks when she is away from her husband. Therefore keep females in the house, keep them as close to yourself as you can, and come home often to keep an eye on your affairs and to keep them in fear and trembling. Make sure they always have work to do in the house and never allow them to be idle.<sup>67</sup>

As the evidence suggests, the classical paradigm of a woman as a threatening 'Other' was still clearly a concern for both the secular and religious patriarchal institutions of the Middle Ages. The art, literature, folklore, and even official religious edicts saw a woman's body like Pandora's Box: "she is herself then full of evil and plagues, and her closed body, like the earth before it, is opened by the plow, contains evils better left buried."<sup>68</sup>

### Witch:

Although knowledge of the pagan influences is necessary to begin to comprehend fully the depiction of the women in the mural, equally important is an understanding of the contemporary religious history within which the iconography was created, and how the female gender came to be synonymous with heretics. The period preceding the creation of the mural, roughly from the tenth to thirteenth centuries, saw an exponential increase in attention paid to dealing with heretical dissidents who threatened the autocratic power of the Church. In 1233, Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) formally established the Papal Inquisition in response to the growing religious sects of Cathars and Waldensians that were growing in

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<sup>67</sup> Paolo da Certaldo, *Libri di buoni costumi*, ed. A. Schiaffini (Florence, 1948), 105-6, in the translation of O'Faolain and Martines, *Not in God's Image* (London, 1973), 169.

<sup>68</sup> Du Bois, 47.

southern France and northern Italy.<sup>69</sup> The Cathars, who preached a Dualist or Manichean faith (i.e., two gods, two creations, good and evil being diametrically opposed and ever present), were formally denounced as heretics and continued to be persecuted under Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254).<sup>70</sup> The newly founded sects of Franciscans and Dominicans, who were heavily influenced by the Thomist and Aristotelian philosophies, came to dominate the papal sanctioned expulsion and punishment of heretics.

While the Inquisition was first established as a device of fear to consolidate and legitimize papal control, the complex political scene of Italy soon became inextricably entangled within this climate of growing religious fervor. By the 1260s, the Guelphs, who supported the Papacy's temporal claim to Italian lands, used the fear of the Inquisition to their benefit, often denouncing their political enemies as heretics and assisting inquisitors within their local communities.<sup>71</sup> This was the case in Massa Marittima, which as the previous chapter explains, was a Guelph controlled city by 1267 and a valued protectorate of the Sienese. It is against this political and religious backdrop that the ambiguous mural of women was created with (I argue) undeniably significant political ramifications.

Returning to the women in the mural, the second woman from the left, dressed in a high-waisted golden gown, pokes a stick upward into the branches. More curiously, there is a barely visible bird's nest with two baby birds that she seems to be disrupting with her stick (Fig. 9). She is the only one of the eight women whose facial features have been preserved, and as she looks up, her lips reveal a slight enigmatic smile. This *risus sapientiae*, or smile

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<sup>69</sup> Larner, 232.

<sup>70</sup> Larner, 230.

<sup>71</sup> Larner, 234-242.

of knowledge, makes the viewer pause, not only wondering what she is doing, but even more intriguingly, why it is making her so happy.

Ferzoco has identified an anecdote from the notorious fifteenth century witchcraft inquisitor's manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, as providing an intriguing possibility to the meaning behind such a strange gesture.<sup>72</sup> The handbook, published in 1487 by the Dominican Inquisitor Heinrich Kramer, alias Institoris, contains a passage about a man who had his penis stolen by a witch:

And what, then, is to be thought of these witches who...sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report?<sup>73</sup>

The similarities between the mural and the text are striking, but how are we to reconcile the two hundred year lapse in time between the two?

Like the beneficent/malevolent dichotomies women were believed to possess, ideas concerning magic and impotence were also prevalent in ancient texts. Ovid, in his *Amores*, and Petronius, in the *Satyricon*, both reference men experiencing impotence and jokingly comment on magic being a possible cause, yet unlike later medieval texts on the subject,

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<sup>72</sup> Ferzoco, 80-1. See also Moira Smith, "The Flying Phallus and the Laughing Inquisitor: Penis Theft in the 'Malleus Maleficarum'," *Journal of Folklore Research* 39, no. 1 (2002): 85-117; Walter Stevens, "Witches Who Steal Penises: Impotence and Illusion in 'Malleus Maleficarum'," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, no. 3 (1998): 495-529.

<sup>73</sup> Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* trans. Montague Summers (New York: Dover, 1971), 121. The original Latin reads: "*Quid deinceps sentiendum super eas maleficas qui huiusmodi membra in copioso interdum numero ut viginti vel triginta membra insimul ad nidum avium vel ad aliquod scrineum includunt, ubi et quasi viventia membra se movent vel avenam vel pabulum consumendo, prout a multis visa sunt, et communis fama refert?*"



there is no connection to impotence being caused by *maleficium*.<sup>74</sup> Although not an overwhelming source of anxiety for Greek and Roman culture, a significant corpus of literature was devoted to the topic of impotence beginning in the twelfth century.<sup>75</sup> The newly translated Aristotelian texts provided scholars with new insight on how to approach ideas of angels, demons, magic, and idolatry in the thirteenth century writings of philosophers Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, and it is around this time that witchcraft becomes an exclusively gendered crime.<sup>76</sup> This chain of developing thought continued with Heinrich Kramer, who cites a passage from Thomas Aquinas as his basis for his theological questions regarding the existence of magic and writes that “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in a woman insatiable.”<sup>77</sup>

While there is no direct correlation between magical remedies for impotence in ancient and later medieval texts, “the ancient sources suggest that while medieval discussions of impotence magic took place in a framework shaped by learned concerns, there also existed an ancient, real, and probably widespread belief that impotence could be

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<sup>74</sup> *Maleficium* may be best translated as magic used towards harmful ends. Catherine Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26.

<sup>75</sup> For further information regarding the rise of magic and witchcraft in the Middle Ages, see Linda C. Hults, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005); Karen Louise Jolly, et al., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); G. L. Simons, *Sex and Superstition* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1973); Charles Zika, *Exorcising our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft, and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Boston: Brill, 2003).

<sup>76</sup> Rider, 28; Smith, 87.

<sup>77</sup> Walter Stevens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 318-21; Kramer, 47.

induced in ways which later became defined as *maleficium*.”<sup>78</sup> Equally important is the logical conclusion that both ancient and medieval learned texts on the subject were radically influenced from popular culture, not just other written sources. Thus, although Heinrich Kramer was the first to complete a book on the anxieties of witchcraft, heretics, and sex, the evidence suggests that it was a common concern long before the book’s publication in 1487. Rider asserts that, “the *Malleus Maleficarum* seems to have been particularly interested in the relationship between witchcraft and sex, but the notion that witches attacked fertility seems to have been widespread, and it fitted in well with the idea that witches attacked whatever was central to Christian society.”<sup>79</sup> The chronological gap between the mural and the text no longer seems so overwhelming. One could even argue that it is appropriate for the art and text to fit so closely, for Kramer was not only drawing on theologians who were contemporary with the mural’s production, but he was legitimizing the populace’s concerns and beliefs regarding witchcraft during that time as well.

The women of the Massa Marittima Mural are integral to its complex and many-layered meanings. Their mirror-like compositional arrangement draws attention to their dualistic qualities—malevolent and benign, cognitive and corporeal, mysterious and sensuous, destructive and procreative—that are rooted in both ancient and medieval sources. Just like the Trecento Last Judgment scenes, the women are divided into good and evil and act out their potential personalities. Their contemporary dress connects them to the medieval viewer and reminds him or her that the threat of impotence and fertility through

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<sup>78</sup> Rider, 28.

<sup>79</sup> Rider, 187; See also Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 177-83.

witchcraft is ever-present, and that the heretical potential is present in all women if they are not bound and controlled.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PHALLUS AND THE SERPENT: INSTRUMENTS OF ANXIETY

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman,  
“for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will surely be opened,  
and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>80</sup>

#### The Phallus

In ancient art, the phallus contained its own intrinsic, generative power as both a symbol of virility *and* fertility. Images of Priapus with his permanently erect phallus were firmly imbedded in the Roman artistic repertoire by the third century B.C.<sup>81</sup> Priapus was the son of Aphrodite who was cursed with permanent impotence while still in her womb by Hera following the Judgment of Paris, but he later suffered from ithyphallicism due to his insatiable lust. His cult spread from its roots in Asia Minor to Greece and eventually Italy, and he was worshipped as a guardian deity of rural livestock, gardens, and harvests. The Roman poet Tibullus celebrates the talismanic power Priapus held for the rural population in an elegy:

And to fair Ceres let a crown of corn ears from our estate  
Be dedicated, and hung before the doors of the temple;  
And in the orchard let a red Priapus act as guardian,

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<sup>80</sup> Genesis 3.4-5.

<sup>81</sup> See "Priapus" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1245.

Scaring off the birds with his terrible sickle.<sup>82</sup>

Tibullus refers to Priapus in connection with Ceres, the goddess of the harvest, and highlights his indispensable role in protecting the yearly crops: the phallus and fertility are linked.

Although his guardianship over the harvest was worshipped and revered in his home in Asia Minor and the rural areas of the Italy that his cult had spread to, the more urban Roman population viewed Priapus with humor. Perhaps the most famous image of the god comes from a wall painting in the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, dating to the first century C.E. (Fig. 10). Priapus casually leans against a ledge as he weighs his phallus on a scale against a bag of money. His large, permanently erect phallus tips the scale in its favor. Depictions of the god, including the fresco from the House of the Vettii, were often placed at thresholds of urban homes, with the apotropaic intention of evoking laughter from the viewer.<sup>83</sup>

Christianity viewed the imagery as lewd and offensive and effectively eliminated Priapus' positive, apotropaic connotations of guardianship and fertility because "he stood for overt pagan mockery of the sin of the flesh, the most bodily aspect of Original Sin."<sup>84</sup> Despite the fact that Priapic images were the targets of zealous clergymen, some images do

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<sup>82</sup> Tibullus, *Elegies*, Book I, vs. 15-18: *Flava Ceres, tibi sit nostro de rure corona/ Spicea, quae temple pendeat ante fores;/ Pomosisque rubber custos ponatur in hortis/ Terreat ut saeve falce Priapus aves.*

<sup>83</sup> The Etruscans also adorned their tombs with phallic shaped funerary stones. Even though the exact intended meaning remains ambiguous, the association of the phallus as a protector at thresholds and transitions remains prominent. See Gabriele Canteni, *Volterra: The Guarnacci Etruscan Museum* (Pisa: Pacini, 2004).

<sup>84</sup> Bernardini, 30.

survive in medieval Tuscan rural churches. *Pievi* at Cennano (Siena) and Gropina (Arezzo) both contain images of males with large, erect phalli in a wall niche (Siena) and carved into a stone capital (Arezzo).<sup>85</sup> This artistic evidence suggests that while the official artistic canon of Christian art condemned phallic imagery, it survived well into the Middle Ages in rural areas, where earlier myths and beliefs lingered despite historical and social change.<sup>86</sup> A logical conclusion may be drawn that the *comune* of Massa Marittima in the thirteenth century would have been familiar with the ancient phallic imagery's connotations of positive generative power and protection. Therefore, the medieval viewers of the mural would have read the presence of the phalli with the knowledge of its ancient context, not as the condemnable embodiment of Original Sin that the Church was attempting to suppress.

For the modern viewer, it is natural to associate the phalli with an erotic or even pornographic message. This was not the case for the medieval viewer. Fercozo argues that "this was in the days before the fig leaf or the cleverly strategically placed veil of linen covering the nude genitalia in paintings. The nude image was not seen to be dirty, even in the case of public art, nor would it have been perceived necessarily as erotic. It would have been seen simply as a depiction of nakedness and nothing else."<sup>87</sup>

While the depiction of phalli in medieval art was relatively common, showing fully erect penises (as in the mural) was extremely rare. In fact, only one other surviving piece of art that includes an erect phallus is known from the same period in Milan: *La Donna*

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<sup>85</sup> Bernardini, 32.

<sup>86</sup> Bernardini, 28.

<sup>87</sup> Lawless, 2.

*Impudica* (the “impure woman”) (Fig. 11).<sup>88</sup> Furthering the connection to the mural, the *La Donna Impudica* relief also contains political connotations. The statue was placed over the Porta Tosa which led into Milan (like the mural, also an extremely visible location) and was widely believed to be a depiction of the Holy Roman Empress, wife of Frederick I. The figure is clad in a long, flowing toga, which is parted by what appears to be a large phallus. This public display was clearly meant to be viewed in a derogatory manner by all those entering the city. Like the Guelph-controlled Massa Marittima, the Milanese erected the statue shortly after the Guelphs drove out the Ghibellines in the late twelfth century. Thus, the two works of art are both politically motivated, and both depict an unnaturally placed phallus: “It’s all there together, the link between the public, the political, the phallus, the Ghibellines and insult.”<sup>89</sup>

Although dated to nearly two centuries after the Tree of Fertility mural, there is one extant example of a mural depicting a phallus tree in the Schloß/Castel Moos-Schulthaus in the Appiano region of Italy (Fig. 12).<sup>90</sup> The iconographic similarities are striking, but the context in which the mural is placed seems to overshadow any meaningful connections between the two unique works. Both depict women gathering ‘fruits’ from below a phallus-laden tree, but the Schloß mural’s private nature (it is painted above the doorway to a banqueting hall in a remote hunting residence of the Apennine mountains) does not carry any of the public and political connotations clearly evident in the Massa Marittima Mural. The ludic content, private nature, later date (c. 1475), and geographical location do not

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<sup>88</sup> The relief is now in the Museum of Ancient Art in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, Italy.

<sup>89</sup> Lawless, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Ferzoco, 79-80.

support a shared reading of any of the socio-political influences that I have identified thus far as integral to the Massa mural's meaning.

### The Serpent:

Although not as prominent, the serpent that coils its way upward to the right of the tree trunk carries an equally complex iconographical meaning as the phalli that decorate its branches (Fig. 13). In Greek mythology, serpents were frequently symbols of mystic knowledge and a believed link between the living and the dead. Like the women of the mural, snakes come from an iconographic tradition of healers and prophets. The Gorgon Medusa's head had coils of serpents where her hair should have been, and the Greek god Apollo was often depicted with a snake winding through his tripod. Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, gained his power to save mortals from death from a vial of Gorgon's blood given to him by Athena.<sup>91</sup> Asclepius soon drew the ire of Zeus and Hades, who both felt his ability to keep mortals from entering the Underworld was too strong a power to possess. Zeus struck Asclepius with a lightning bolt, but his memory was still worshipped fervently by cults who adopted as their symbol the Rod of Asclepius, a staff with a single serpent entwined around it.<sup>92</sup> Finally, Herodotus and Homer both record the myth of Melampus, a legendary soothsayer and healer who gained his prophetic powers and the ability to understand the language of animals after a snake licked his ears.<sup>93</sup> The ancient corpus of

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<sup>91</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library*, 3.10.3.

<sup>92</sup> A snake is also an attribute of Hygieia, who is worshipped with Asclepius. See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 734-5.

<sup>93</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 2.49; Homer, *Odyssey* xi.223-42.



references to snakes is too vast to examine in this thesis, but the examples listed above are sufficient to situate the serpent within the context of the phallus and the female as a positive, fertile, mystical, and in turn soteriological ancient symbol.

Furthermore, like the phallus and the female, the serpent is dramatically reinterpreted within the Christian canon. Although Genesis acknowledges that the serpent in the Garden of Eden possesses a prophetic knowledge when he tells Eve that “her eyes will be opened” if she takes the forbidden fruit, its knowledge is the tool of Lucifer.<sup>94</sup> The serpent’s ancient revered status is replaced as the principle symbolic source of evil, sin, and temptation. The Christian Church was equating knowledge with sin and thus effectively preserving the status quo, which was especially needed within the tumultuous context of the thirteenth century. As evidenced in the rapidly developing genre of Last Judgment scenes throughout Italy, the rise in heretic prosecutions by the newly founded Inquisition, and the theological attacks on the once-infallible Church, a newfound focus on guilt, sin, and redemption permeated the minds of laymen and clergy alike. By placing the serpent in the mural next to a tree with ‘fruits’ of infertility, the connection to the evils that resulted from Eve’s decision (as well as her female predecessors’ potential decisions) in the Garden is apparent.

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<sup>94</sup> Genesis 3.1-6.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The population of Massa Marittima had fallen from 10,000 to 2,000 due to war, plague, and famine by the year 1373.<sup>95</sup> The once thriving *comune* shrank into obscurity as quickly as it had risen in prominence only a century and a half before. Recent restoration of the mural, however, suggests that it was slightly altered before it was forgotten and left to decay, as was so often the fate of politicized art once its meaning had become obsolete. The Guelph cities of Massa Marittima, Florence, and Siena brokered a treaty agreement with Ghibelline-controlled Pisa in 1333 that included a clause forbidding the depiction of traitors. There is evidence that the phalli were painted over with a floral motif and the large red jug between the two women on the left side of the mural was added to cover up an exceptionally large phallus that the two women were originally fighting over.<sup>96</sup> These alterations further support the theory that the mural was originally a politically motivated work that was meant to equate the Ghibelline party with a society of discord, wantonness, infertility, and bad government.

By situating the Massa Marittima Mural within the tradition of political art that was developing in the late Duecento, one cannot help but draw connections to Ambrogio

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<sup>95</sup> Larner, 261.

<sup>96</sup> Ferzoco, 77; A. Gabbrielli, *Istoria dell'antica città di Massa Marittima*, ms. Massa Marittima, Archivio Storico, Memorie Storico-Letterarie, 1; published as *Storica dell'antica città di Massa* (Grosseto, 1881).

Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* located in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena (Figures 14-16).<sup>97</sup> Like Lorenzetti's dualistic depictions of society that are divided by an enthroned personification of Justice, the women in the mural are separated by the large deciduous tree (the tree of knowledge, the tree of forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden). Each side acts out the possible directions the society could take: left or right, evil or good, infertile or fertile.

The physical binary separation of the composition is mirrored in the dualistic interpretations of the iconography itself. As pagan symbols of auspiciousness, fertility, and mystic knowledge, the phalli and serpent in the composition are inverted into symbols of sin, temptation, and fear when read within the anxiety-filled century of the first Christian Inquisition. This duality makes the meaning of the mural all the more profound because it insinuates a knowledge that the medieval viewer must have had of these ancient symbols.

The mural furthermore plays with the patriarchal Christian fear of a woman as a mysterious and threatening 'Other,' a fear that had remained firmly imbedded in the European consciousness since the time of Aristotle. The women act out men's worst fears as riotous witches, prophetesses, and mystics—ideas that were clearly formed by the Duecento and supported with contemporary philosophical and theological texts as well as Last Judgment scenes. Finally, juxtaposing the Tree of Fertility mural with an image of

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<sup>97</sup> While religious Last Judgment scenes depict the damned to Christ's left and the saved souls to His right, the secularized allegory of Lorenzetti, like the Massa Marittima Mural, switches the sinister side of government to the *viewer's* left. The left had a long tradition to being equated with evil and sinister deeds (the word sinister is derived from the Latin, *sinestra*, meaning left), and the juxtaposed composition is perhaps a precursor to the Humanist movement, which among other things shifted its focus from the celestial divine world to the present human one (i.e. the world of the viewer).

Mary in the central bay only further highlights the women's acts of infertility against the Christian paradigm of purity.

The Massa Marittima Mural's composition was a completely novel innovation that drew from ancient and religious imagery and situated it within a context of secular and politicized art. The irrational fears evoked from the erratic scene of infertility were meant to sway the populace from the Ghibelline political party, whose threat was ever present for the Guelph-controlled *comune*. Not only may we as modern viewers infer from the composition the official political climate of Massa Marittima, but perhaps more importantly, we are offered a glimpse into the everyday beliefs, fears, anxieties, and traditions that may not be found in officially sanctioned texts or art.

## FIGURES

Figure 1: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Restored Mural. Massa Marittima. Photo Bruno.



Figure 2: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Restored Mural. Detail of phalli. Massa Marittima. Photo Bruno.





Figure 3: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Exterior. Massa Marittima. Photo Erica Longenbach.



Figure 4: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Interior. Massa Marittima. Photo Bruno.





Figure 5: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Restored Mural. Detail of bird, serpentine figure, and four women. Massa Marittima. Photo George Ferzoco.



Figure 6: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Restored Mural. Detail of four women. Massa Marittima.  
Photo Bruno.



Figure 7: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Central Rear Wall. Massa Marittima. Photo Bruno.





Figure 8: Giotto. Last Judgement. Detail of Hell. Arena Chapel. Padua. 1306. Photo Web Gallery of Art.

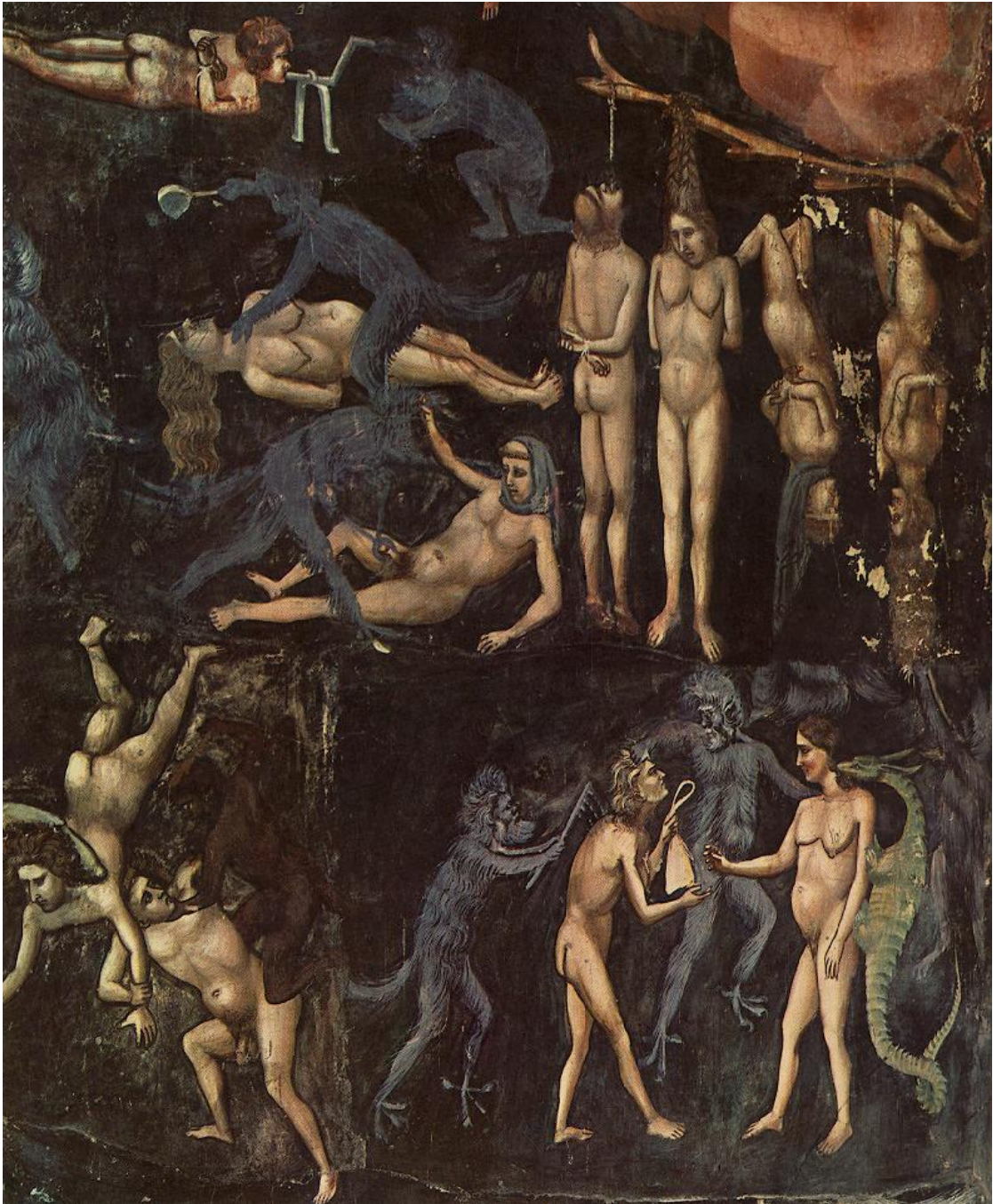


Figure 9: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Detail of bird's nest. Massa Marittima. Photo Bruno.





Figure 10: Fresco of Priapus. House of the Vettii. Pompeii. 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. Photo Web Gallery of Art.



Figure 11: La Donna Impudica. Museum of Ancient Art in the Castello Sforzesco, Milan.  
12<sup>th</sup> century. Photo Giovanni dall'Orto.



Figure 12: Wall Painting of penis tree. Schloß/Castel Moos-Schulthaus. Eppan/Appiano. ca. 1475. Photo Helga Spitzer Lahner.





Figure 13: Fonte dell'Abbondanza. Detail of serpentine figure. Massa Marittima. Photo Bruno.



Figure 14: Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Allegory of Good and Bad Government. Detail of Justice.  
Palazzo Pubblico. Siena. 1338-40. Photo Web Gallery of Art.



Figure 15: Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Allegory of Good and Bad Government. Detail of Good Government. Palazzo Pubblico. Siena. 1338-40. Photo Web Gallery of Art.

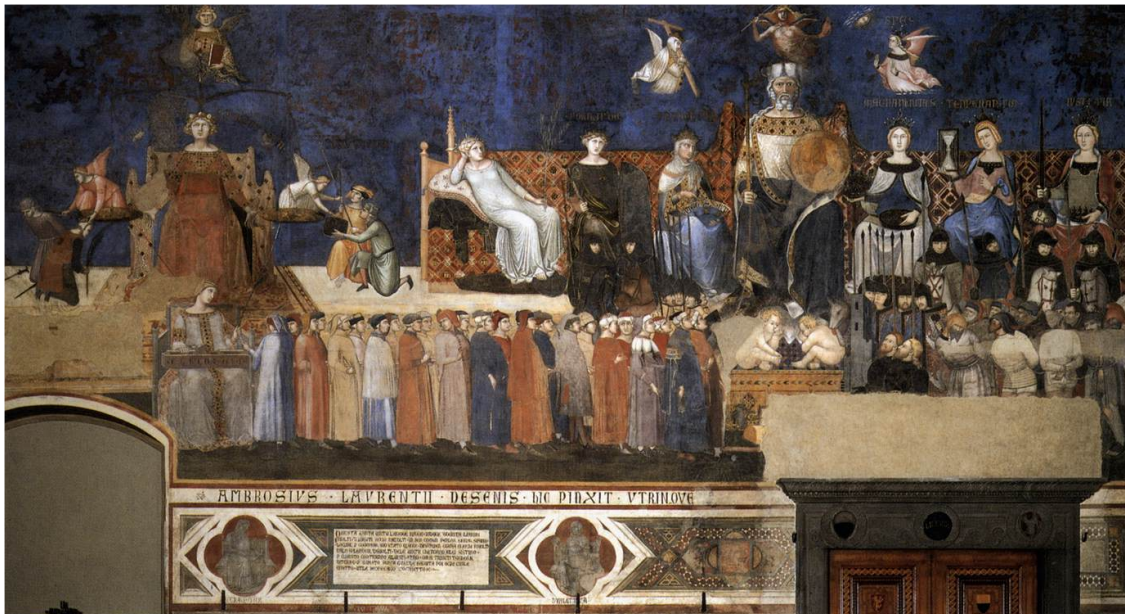




Figure 16 Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Allegory of Good and Bad Government. Detail of Bad Government. Palazzo Pubblico, Siena. 1338-40. Photo Web Gallery of Art.



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