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Episodic Design: Giotto's Arena Chapel and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales**

The profound impact on Chaucer of his encounter with Italian culture during two diplomatic trips to the country in the 1370's has long been recognized, in particular his debt to the writings of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio (e.g. Boitani, 1983; Wallace, 1997). What has been only rarely discussed in any detail is the poet's relationship with the early fourteenth-century Florentine artist Giotto di Bondone, whom the three aforementioned Italian writers all praise as nonpareil[1]. We do not know which of Giotto's works might have been available to Chaucer during his visit to Florence in 1373, but it is hard to believe that he did not see and admire the artist's frescoes in Santa Croce's Bardi Chapel, commissioned by the banking family with whom Chaucer is thought to have been sent to negotiate on behalf of the English king (Hagiioannu, 2001; Turner, 2019: 161-165). Such celebrated paintings, by one whom his near-contemporary Boccaccio compared to Apelles and whom Leonardo da Vinci later judged «excelled not only all the masters of his time but all those of many bygone ages», would have been unlike anything Chaucer had ever encountered in England or France (Boccaccio, 1974: 29; Leonardo da Vinci, 1974: 43). Later, on his 1378 mission to the Visconti in Milan, he may also have seen other works by Giotto, now lost, commissioned by that family (Gilbert, 1991; Turner, 2019: 326). And it is just possible that, while in the region, Chaucer visited Padua; not, like his Clerk, to listen to Petrarch, who was by then dead, but to view Giotto's greatest and best-preserved work, the frescoes in the Arena Chapel[2].

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** It is an honor to have been asked to contribute to this celebration of the work of Dora Faraci whose scholarly knowledge and personal generosity in welcoming my wife and myself has enriched my understanding of Italy.

[1] For early praise of Giotto, see Maginnis (1997); for discussions of Chaucer's possible knowledge of Giotto, see, most recently, Turner (2019: 158-165), and references that follow in my text.

[2] Johnston (2021), who argues for the influence on Chaucer of Trecento art, especially

The Arena Chapel is a small rectangular building, built next to his palace by the wealthy Enrico Scrovegni and perhaps designed by Giotto himself. The chapel's walls and ceiling are wholly covered with frescoes. Its main pictorial cycle, almost entirely on the south and north walls, is composed of scenes from the lives of the Virgin, her parents, and especially Christ. Beginning at the top eastern corner of the south wall, the cycle spirals around the chapel in three parallel bands, forcing viewers to move their heads or bodies to follow the story as it unfolds. The highest row on the south and north walls tells the legend of the Virgin's parents, Joachim and Anna, and of the early life of Mary herself. This is followed, on the lower two rows of both walls, by the intertwined lives of the Virgin and Christ, beginning with his birth and ending with his Passion and Resurrection, plus a final scene of the disciples alone at Pentecost. The effect on the viewer in this intimate space of Giotto's glowing colors and powerful human stories is overwhelming, fully justifying Bruce Cole's observation that the «Arena Chapel remains the most beautiful and important fresco cycle of the Trecento» (Cole, 1976: 95).

The lack of evidence that Chaucer ever went to Padua, the fact that the Arena Chapel is not a direct source for the stories of the *Canterbury Tales*, and the difference between visual and verbal story telling are primary reasons why these two complex narrative cycles have never, to my knowledge, been discussed together. But recently Chaucer scholars have become more willing to entertain broader ideas about what constitutes a source or analogue. Many, for instance, have argued for a reconsideration of the *Decameron* as a source for the *Canterbury Tales*, despite the lack of close verbal parallels, arguing that Chaucer might have come across Boccaccio's work in Italy, been impressed by its tales and structure, and remembered them when he came to construct the *Canterbury Tales* (Cooper, 1983: 36; Thompson, 1996; Cooper, 2002: 7-13). It is possible that Chaucer also brought back from Italy a memory of the Arena Chapel, but my argument does not depend on such an encounter. David Wallace, for instance, has argued that whether or not the *Decameron* was a Chaucerian source in the conventional sense, reading the *Canterbury Tales* «against» Boccaccio's story-collection reveals «moments of both likeness and dissimilarity that sharpen understanding of the distinctive qualities of each» (Wallace, 2000: 222).

Giotto's now overpainted astrological painting in Padua's Ragione, seems to imply that Chaucer might have visited the city, which also then contained Giotto frescoes in the great church of Saint Antony, only traces of which remain.

Likewise, reading the *Canterbury Tales* against the Arena Chapel allows us to recognize similarities of design despite their different ambitions. In particular, the Arena Chapel is analogous to the *Canterbury Tales* in what I call its episodic design, the relationship of individual episodes to one another.

The *Canterbury Tales* and the Arena Chapel are both multi-episodic works. Giotto's thirty-seven scenes form a continuous narrative over three generations, while Chaucer's twenty-four tales have sharply different characters and subjects, distinct from the continuous pilgrimage frame in which they are set. Despite their individual contents and organization, the two works share elements of episodic design, specifically, (1) the juxtaposition of congruent episodes so that they conflict or are in dialogue with one another, and (2) the linkage of discrete episodes into non-sequential networks by means of repeated motifs or images. The juxtaposition and linkage of episodes in the *Canterbury Tales* go far beyond that found in other contemporary story collections, even in such ambitious works as Boccaccio's *Decameron* and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, let alone Chaucer's own *Legend of Good Women* and *Monk's Tale* (Cooper, 1983: 56-57)[3]. Likewise, the episodic connections in the Arena Chapel are not equaled in fresco cycles by Giotto's imitators, such as those by Altichiero in Padua, or in the painter's other securely attributed work (Ladis, 2008: 4-5). While scholars of Chaucer and Giotto have noted such elements of design in each work, their similarity has not been recognized, which is the purpose of this essay.

I begin with the juxtaposition of contiguous episodes in the Arena Chapel and the *Canterbury Tales*, which has long been discussed as a fundamental principle of design in both works (e.g. Muscatine, 1957: 222; Cooper, 1983: 63; Windeatt, 2003: 226; Alpatoff, 1969; Ladis, 2008: 4). Chaucer's most dramatic form of juxtaposition is putting an adjacent pair of tales in opposition to one another, usually emphasized by personal conflict between their tellers. Instead of moving on from one episode to another, then, the reader is forced to stop, look back, and compare the two. This element of design, as is well known, appears in the opening fragment of the *Tales* in the response of the Miller to the Knight and then of the Reeve to the Miller. When the *Knight's Tale* concludes, the Host invites the Monk, as the highest-ranking cleric, to tell the next tale. But this attempt at hierarchical order is immediately

[3] Forni (2015: 55-58) notes connections between and among the tales of the *Decameron*, but they are relatively superficial compared to those in the *Canterbury Tales*.

upended by the drunken Miller, who insists that he will «quite the Knyghtes tale» (3125-3127)[4]. While mimicking the basic plot of the *Knight's Tale* (two young men in pursuit of one young woman), the *Miller's Tale* differs in style, setting, and kind of character. Chivalric romance is replaced by fabliau, a grand amphitheater by a workman's house, Boethian philosophy by proverbs, the refined Emelye by the saucy Alisoun, and a tragic death and political marriage by a foul kiss, scalded rear end, broken arm, and laughter.

The literary conflict of the first two tales is replicated in the second and third — now not between genres but within one, the fabliau. The Reeve is offended that the Miller has told a bawdy tale of a cuckolded carpenter (the Reeve's own craft), and, at its conclusion, he declares that he be revenged with a reply told in the Miller's own «cherles termes» (3913-3917). What follows is a further variation of the plot of the first two tales (now with two women as well as two 'lovers'), but this new fabliau is much more sordid than the Miller's. In contrast to the clever Nicholas, both clerks in the *Reeve's Tale* are easily made fools of by a miller, whose own unjustified self-satisfaction and family pride make his ultimate humiliation all the more crushing. His wife and his daughter, described as drab and passive in contrast to the colorful, frisky Alison, are each violated by one of the clerks, in what are essentially rapes, not from sexual passion but to revenge having been tricked. The technique of contrasting pairs of tales is not continued with the Cook's London tale, which concludes the fragment, but Chaucer employs it elsewhere in the collection, notably when the Friar and Summoner quarrel in the interval between the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* (840-849), vowing to tell disparaging tales against the other's calling, which they do as soon as the Wife finishes.

Although such explicit confrontation between adjacent tales is not found in other story collections known to Chaucer, the Arena Chapel provides an intriguing parallel, given that throughout «the viewer encounters paired antithetical images» (Derbes and Sandona, 2004: 199), most obviously in the personifications of the seven Vices along the dado of the south wall directly facing their corresponding Virtues on the north wall (Cole, 1996/1998). Adjoining episodes in the narrative cycle itself also stand in opposition to one another, especially the only two not on the north and south walls and not in sequence. In the middle of the left side of the chapel's east chancel arch, Giotto depicts Judas, urged

[4] All citations to the *Canterbury Tales* are from Chaucer (1987), and given in the text.

on by a nasty black devil, receiving a bag of money from Annas, while Caiaphas and a temple official scornfully look on, while on the right side, across the gap of the arch, is the affecting meeting at the *Visitation* of the radiantly pregnant Virgin Mary and the aged pregnant Elizabeth with their gracious handmaidens (see Fig. 1; the images are located at the end of the essay). As others have noted, the visual similarities between the two episodes (including two main persons in both and comparable buildings at the right of each frame) only emphasize their spiritual distance: scheming men vs nurturing women, evil vs good, death vs life (Cole, 1976: 83-85; Ladis, 2008: 19-27). Other contrasting episodes in the Arena narrative cycle are the *Flight into Egypt* followed by the *Massacre of the Innocents* and the *Lamentation* over the crucified body of Christ followed by the *Noli Me Tangere*. In the first pair, the image of a very determined Mary successfully escaping with her child from Herod's murderous decree stands in contrast to the scene of wailing mothers unable to save their babies from the pitiless murderers directed by Herod in person. In the second pair, the prone naked corpse of Christ at the left of the frame, mourned by his followers and angels with Mary Magdalen caressing his foot, is juxtaposed to the resurrected Christ, fully clothed in white and gold, who moves out of the frame to the right, while an astonished Mary Magdalene tries in vain to touch him and two large angels sit, rather smugly, on the empty tomb.

Although the Arena Chapel shares this element of episodic design with the *Canterbury Tales* (opposing adjacent tales), the technique is used for different ends in each work. Giotto's contrasting episodes, while consistent in style, reinforce and deepen the orthodox Christian dichotomies of the saved and the damned, the quick and the dead, whereas Chaucer's juxtaposed pairs, which introduce new, stylistically diverse material into English poetry, are less easily separated into positive and negative. The epic *Knight's Tale* is certainly more chivalric, learned, and romantic than the *Miller's Tale*, but the latter has its own distinctive merits, such as comedy, human ingenuity, and topicality. Each tale tests the other's values, whereas the holy affection between Mary and Elizabeth is not challenged, quite the reverse, by the deceit of Judas. Binary moral judgments are also not appropriate with the Miller's and Reeve's tales or the Summoner's and the Friar's. Each episode adds to the many voices of the *Canterbury Tales*, leaving it to individual readers to evaluate the validity of their distinct views of the world.

Other congruent juxtapositions in the *Canterbury Tales* are less obviously confrontational because not intensified by disputes between

their tellers. The *Clerk's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale*, for example, are linked by the similarity of the last line of the former and the first line of the latter, and both are about an older man's marriage to a younger wife whom he attempts and ultimately fails to dominate. Both tales also deal with extremes of human behavior: the extraordinary patience of Griselda in the face of Walter's irrational tests in the *Clerk's Tale* and the utter nastiness of the principal characters in the *Merchant's Tale*. That Chaucer follows an almost allegorical tale of Christian virtue with a fabliau of raw sexual appetite (with pagan gods) demonstrates once again the poet's literary and moral range. Other paired tales in dialogue include the *Physician's* and *Pardoner's Tales*, which Cooper (1996: 256) calls «antitypes», given the contrast between the virtuous, virginal Virginia and the violent, drunken rioters, though both she and they suffer violent deaths at the hands of those closest to them. Significant parallels have also been noted between another pair of adjoining tales: the spiritual *Second Nun's Tale* and the materialistic *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (Grennen, 1966; Rosenberg, 1968). This dialectic between adjacent pairs is an explicit demonstration of the interaction between disparate kinds of tales that distinguishes Chaucer's story collection.

The Arena Chapel also contains paired episodes in dialogue with one another rather than in sharp opposition[5]. Alpatoff first identified, and others have further analyzed, Giotto's innovative use of adjacent *vertical* pairs. For example, the scene of the Magi kneeling before Christ in the middle band of the south wall appears just above the scene of his kneeling to wash the disciples' feet, emphasizing the humble Lord that the worshipped babe became (see Fig. 2). Likewise, the *Baptism* is located over the *Crucifixion*, both with an almost nude Christ in the center of the frame, connecting the beginning of the Lord's ministry with its agonizing end. This grim juxtaposition is followed, shortly after, by two positive vertical images that portray the triumph of life over death: the *Raising of Lazarus* is placed just above the risen Christ in the *Noli Me Tangere*. As a written work, the *Canterbury Tales*, unlike the Arena Chapel, cannot physically place one tale over another, but, with Giotto in mind, we can see a comparable relationship between the tales that begin or end contiguous fragments in the standard Ellesmere order of the *Canterbury Tales*. As Donald Howard (1978: 215) has noted,

[5] The Chapel's most traditional juxtapositions are the small quatrefoil Old Testament scenes that adjoin and prefigure large episodes from the life of Christ on the north wall, such as a small image of Jewish circumcision to the left of the *Baptism of Christ* and of Ezekiel's chariot drawn to heaven to the left of the *Ascension.*

the first tale of Fragment I, the Knight's, and the first tale of Fragment II, the Man of Law's, are about the two dominant value systems of medieval society, the chivalric and the Christian. Likewise, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, which begins Fragment III, and the *Clerk's Tale*, which begins IV, describe very different kinds of extraordinary wives, whereas the *Merchant's* and *Franklin's Tales*, which conclude Fragments IV and V, share both a cast of characters (knight, lady, squire) and an emphasis on illusion and true sight, despite their contrasting ideas of human nature (Cooper, 1996: 242). These pairs of tales, like those discussed above that follow one another sequentially, are more meaningful when considered together rather than separately. The Arena Chapel's experiments with contiguous pairs in dialogue are a noteworthy match to Chaucer's equally inventive design technique in the *Canterbury Tales*.

A more intricate element of design shared by Chaucer and Giotto is their creation of networks of unconnected episodes. Chaucerians have long explored the common themes, such as marriage, free will, and human suffering, shared by widely separated tales (Whittock, 1968; Kean, 1972), or they have grouped unadjacent tales by type, such as the romances and the fabliaux. My focus here, however, is on neither theme nor genre, but on the linkages between a group of tales created by specific internal motifs, such as character types, particular actions, and visual images. Helen Cooper has offered the most thorough investigation of the complex webs of interrelated motifs and images (as well as themes) in the *Canterbury Tales*, especially in *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Cooper, 1983) and in successive editions of her *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Cooper, 1996). I owe much to her findings in what follows. Nothing comparable to this kind of episodic design is found in Gower's *Confessio*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, or Chaucer's two other story collections, but, once again, Giotto's Arena Chapel proves a contemporary parallel, for, in the words of Andrew Ladis (2008: 52), «Time and again we are invited to break the linear continuity of the narrative and to observe connections that cross time».

As Cooper (1996: 85) shows, the *Knight's Tale*, the very first of the *Canterbury Tales*, contains many such internal motifs and images that reappear, in different contexts and with different effects, in subsequent, often widely separated, tales. To give just two of her examples, the use in the *Knight's Tale* of a woman with two lovers is not only parodied in the subsequent Miller's tale, as we have seen, but the same triangle is

also found in the chivalric *Franklin's Tale*, the nasty *Merchant's Tale*, and the devout *Second Nun's Tale*, with God as one of Cecilia's lovers. Significant supernatural intervention in human affairs is another motif that connects widely scattered tales beginning with the first. Pagan gods cause Arcite's death in the *Knight's Tale* and contribute to the duping of January in the *Merchant's Tale*. More benign interventions by Christian divinities — God, Mary, and an angel — are decisive in the *Man of Law's*, *Prioress's*, and *Second Nun's Tales*.

To Cooper's motifs we might add a physical gesture: kneeling to beseech an authority figure. Near the beginning of the *Knight's Tale* a company of Theban ladies stop Theseus on his return to Athens, begging on their knees for his help against the tyrant Creon (897). Later Hypolita and Emelye themselves kneel weeping before Theseus to request he pardon Arcite and Palamon (1758). Both entreaties are granted by the noble duke. In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, as we might expect, the same gesture means something quite different. The Wife claims that she so managed her fifth husband, Jankyn, that, despite his anti-feminist tirades, he at last «kneled faire adoun» and begged her forgiveness (803). The same gesture in these two tales invites us to compare male chivalric graciousness and bourgeoise female assertiveness. A rather different kind of ruler and a very different wife are defined in the *Clerk's Tale* by two more subservient kneelings. Walter's people are so grateful that their headstrong marquis has agreed to their modest wish that he marry and produce an heir that they thank him «knelynge upon hir knees ful reverently» (187), while the poor maid Griselda also goes down on her knees when Walter first calls for her, waiting patiently to hear «the lords wille» (292-294), little knowing how cruelly willful he will turn out to be. This network of association by gesture is further augmented with kneeling petitions to divine rather than human authority, also beginning with the *Knight's Tale.* Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye each pray to their respective pagan gods before the tournament. Only Palamon does so on his knees (2219), and only he achieves exactly what he wants. In the later *Franklin's Tale*, Aurelius's fervent prayer on his bare knees to Apollo to cover the threatening rocks and force Dorigen to fulfill her careless promise is apparently wholly fruitless (1025). Christian divinities prove more generously responsive to such petitions. Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale* «sette hire doun on knees» and prays successfully to God to save her from a false accusation of murder (638) and later from danger on the open sea (825). Even more poignant are the little clergeon's Latin prayers on his knees to the Virgin in the *Prioress's*

Tale (507, 529), whose sincerity prompts her to appear to the murdered child, cause him to sing again, and reassure him of her protection. These networks of motifs are an important way in which Chaucer encourages us to make connections and contrasts between separated tales.

Once again, the Arena Chapel provides a close parallel to this form of episodic design in the *Canterbury Tales*. As with the *Knight's Tale*, motifs and images in Giotto's first narrative scene, the *Expulsion of Joachim*, are echoed later in the cycle. In the *Expulsion*, Joachim's intended sacrifice at the temple is rejected because of his childlessness and he is forcibly sent away (see Fig. 3). Ladis (2008: 59) notes that Joachim's ejection is «mirrored and inverted» by the episode at the end of the same upper band on the south wall that portrays the embrace of Joachim by his wife Anna outside Jerusalem's Golden Gate. Bruce Cole (1976: 76) further contrasts «the intimate caress of Anna's hands against her husband's head with the rough, brutal pull of the priest's arm on Joachim's sleeve». The gesture by which the priest forcefully grabs Joachim's cloak is also duplicated in later scenes in which the movements of other holy persons are thwarted. In the *Kiss of Judas*, a figure with his back toward us holds onto the cloak of a fleeing disciple whose body is already out of the frame, just as later in *Christ Carrying the Cross*, a soldier forcefully grabs Mary's cloak to keep her from following her son to Golgotha.

Another web of three episodes beginning with the *Expulsion* connects increasingly dangerous threats to three generations of Christ's family. Joachim's backward look of hurt bewilderment as he is shoved away from the temple is echoed in Joseph's backward look of anxious worry on the desperate *Flight into Egypt* and again in Christ's backward look of dismay as he is hauled before the Sanhedrin to be condemned to death. Furthermore, Joseph's locking eyes with the priest as he looks back in the *Expulsion* initiates another extensive web of key moments in which two main characters exchange intense looks that express a range of psychological states. These include the exchanges between Mary and her newborn baby at the *Nativity*, between Christ and John at the *Baptism*, between Judas and Christ at the *Kiss*, between Mary and Christ at *Christ Carrying the Cross*, and between Christ and Mary Magdalen at the *Resurrection*, not to mention Mary's intense stare into the face of her dead son in the *Lamentation*. This string of mutual gazes summarizes Giotto's entire narrative.

Networks of episodes linked by internal motifs and images occur throughout the Arena Chapel and the *Canterbury Tales*. A striking

example that describes both the shape and meaning of Christ's life is a series of linked images of loving female hands in relation to the Savior's body. At his birth, Mary and another woman gently place the newborn child into the manger in the *Nativity*, while at his death in the *Lamentation*, the head of Christ's inert body is tenderly supported by a woman with her back to us, as his mother lifts the body toward her and Mary Magdalen caresses his pierced foot. The story of female hands does not end here, of course. In the very next episode, the *Noli Me Tangere*, Mary Magdalen's outstretched hands are prevented by the risen Lord from touching his now divine body, no longer in need of human care.

Another such network is created by images of Jerusalem's gates. The first of these gates frames the reunion of Jesus's grandparents, Joachim and Anna, at the *Golden Gate*; the second gate appears at the extreme right of his equally joyous *Entrance into Jerusalem*; and the third is at the extreme left of *Christ Carrying the Cross*, representing not the Messiah's welcome into the holy city but his rejection from it and the last time Mary, whose conception was heralded in the first of these episodes, sees her son alive. The repeated image of Jerusalem's gates emphasizes how the promise of human life and popular acclamation becomes the certainty of death, a death that will, paradoxically, result in the ultimate triumph of eternal life.

Despite the more varied locales of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer also associates disparate tales by a feature of their setting. No scenic element is more vivid than the repeatedly cited tree in the middle of January's enclosed garden in the *Merchant's Tale* (2210, 2257, 2360, 2374, 2411), within whose branches May eagerly cuckolds the blind January standing below, thus mocking his earlier claim that, though white of hair, he is a «blosmy tree» that is «neither drye ne deed» (1463). An even more portentous tree is the one at which the rioters in the *Pardoner's Tale* find Death (763, 769). Earlier in the same tale, mention is also made of the fatal tree in the Garden of Eden whose fruit brought death into the world (510), which itself suggests its New Testament anti-type on which death was conquered. That, of course, is the «croys of Crist» and «victorious tree», which Custance invokes in the *Man of Law's Tale* when in peril on the sea (450, 456) and which Griselda calls the «croys of tree» when she traces it on her son to preserve his soul when he is taken away in the *Clerk's Tale* (558).

To return to the *Merchant's Tale*, the tree as a place of passionate consummation links that tale to other fabliaux by means of their

places of sexual coupling. These include the carpenter's bedroom in the *Miller's Tale* where Alisoun and Nicholas enjoy their «revel» and «melody» (3650-3656), the more claustrophobic bedroom of the *Reeve's Tale* where the miller's wife and daughter are assaulted while he snores nearby, and the marital house of the *Shipman's Tale* where the wife transacts a business deal to sell her sexual favors for a night to her husband's friend Daun John (313-320). This network of trysting places extends beyond the fabliaux. Even more awkward than the tree branches of the *Merchant's Tale* is the place where Chanticleer has to copulate in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, as he complains to Pertelote, «I may nat on yow ryde,/ For that oure perche is maad so narwe, allas» (3168-3169). A radically different, but equally frustrated, sexual encounter occurs in the bedroom of the *Second Nun's Tale*, where Cecilia denies Valerian the physical union he naturally expects on his wedding night, persuading him to accept instead a «clene love» (159), which brings about his martyrdom but also the «corone of lif that may nat faille» (388). These various erotic locales in the *Canterbury Tales* create a network, but their evaluation is left to the reader. For instance, some may prefer the bodily revel of Alisoun and Nicholas to Cecilia's promise of eternal bliss.

Finally, the *Canterbury Tales* and the Arena Chapel both contain a web of episodes that is analogous in both design and subject: mothers and their children. Chaucer's maternal images begin in the *Man of Law's Tale* with Custance's expressions of worry for the safety of her infant son as they are being set adrift in a small boat (834-840, 855-861), a scene closely echoed by Griselda's fear in the *Clerk's Tale* for the fate of first her daughter and then her son, both of whom she believes are being taken away to be killed (555-560, 680-683). In the Arena Chapel, such motherly love begins more positively with the image of Anna joyfully reaching for her child in the *Nativity of Mary*. The parallel gesture of Mary herself in the *Nativity of Christ* is equally loving, but the seriousness of Mary's expression reveals her awareness of the suffering that awaits her son, reminiscent of the apprehensions of Custance and Griselda and of the frantic grief of the widowed mother in the *Prioress's Tale*, who goes «half out of hir mynde» when her son fails to return home (594). Giotto's comparable web of maternal images includes a heart-rending scene of its own in which howling mothers desperately and unsuccessfully try to save their children from Herod and his grim executioners in the *Massacre of the Innocents*. This is itself linked visually to three, consecutive later scenes in which we see Mary grieving for her doomed son: as he is led off to execution in *Christ's*

Carrying the Cross, at the *Crucifixion* itself, and when she embraces his dead body at the *Lamentation*. The final link in this chain is the last appearance of Mary. In the *Ascension*, she is on her knees, with hands folded in contemplation or adoration, watching her son being assumed into heaven. The similarity of these webs of images of maternal love highlights how central this emotion is to both works.

In what is necessarily only a partial study, I have made a preliminary case for similarities of design in the Arena Chapel and the *Canterbury Tales*. In both works, Giotto and Chaucer adopt techniques of episodic design to create suggestive relationships between scenes, both contiguous and separated. Such design asks us not only to view or read these multi-part creations sequentially from beginning to end but also to look forward and backward to compare episodes, in pairs or networks. Becoming aware of such relationships and exploring their meaning is central to the aesthetic and intellectual delight of the Arena Chapel and the *Canterbury Tales.* Giotto and Chaucer's similarity of design does not, as we have seen, mean similarity of subject or purpose. The relationships Giotto fashions between episodes is meant to encourage the viewer to understand familiar Christian stories in more intellectually and emotionally engaging ways, whereas Chaucer uses the same technique to challenge readers to explore unexpected connections between diverse tales and viewpoints. Whether or not Chaucer ever set eyes on the Arena Chapel, acknowledging it as analogous to the *Canterbury Tales* enlarges our sense of the English poet's relationship to Italian culture, just as reading these two fourteenth-century masterpieces together, in ways I have only been able to suggest here, refines our appreciation of the distinctive achievement of each.

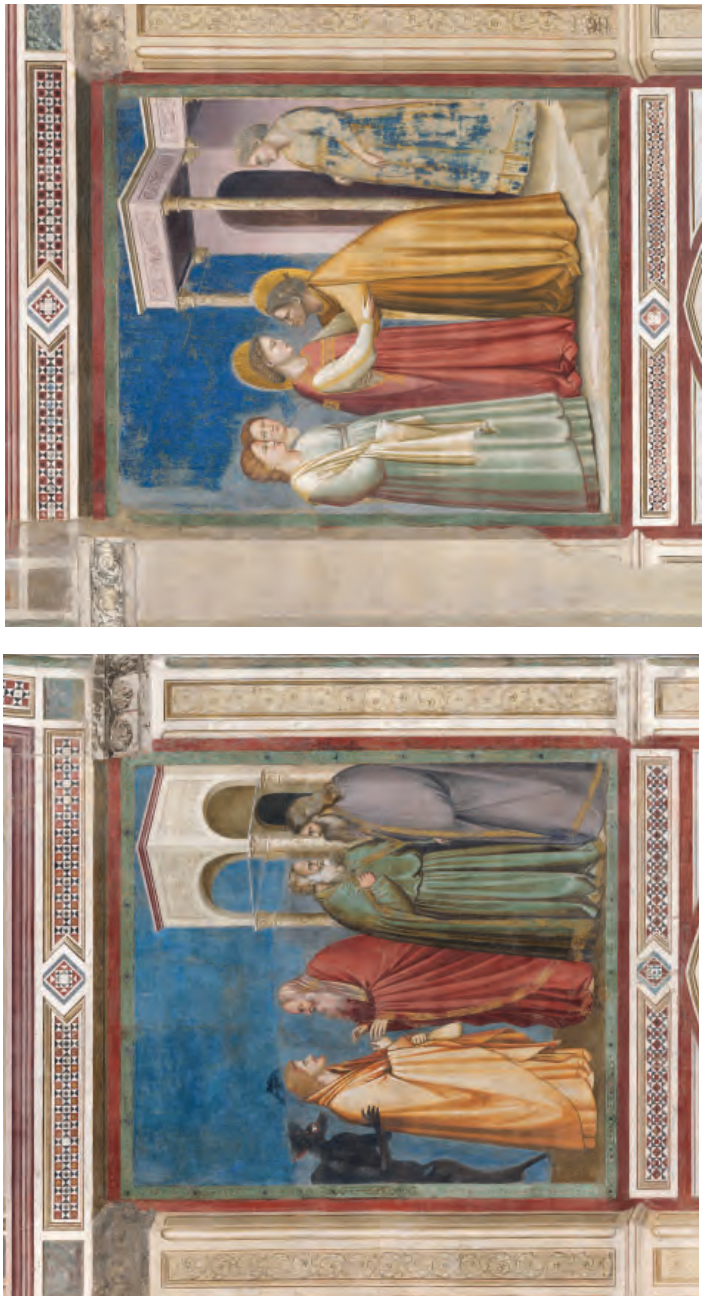

Fig. 1: Left: *The Pact of Judas*. Right: *The Visitation*.
(Su concessione del Comune di Padova – tutti i diritti di legge riservati)

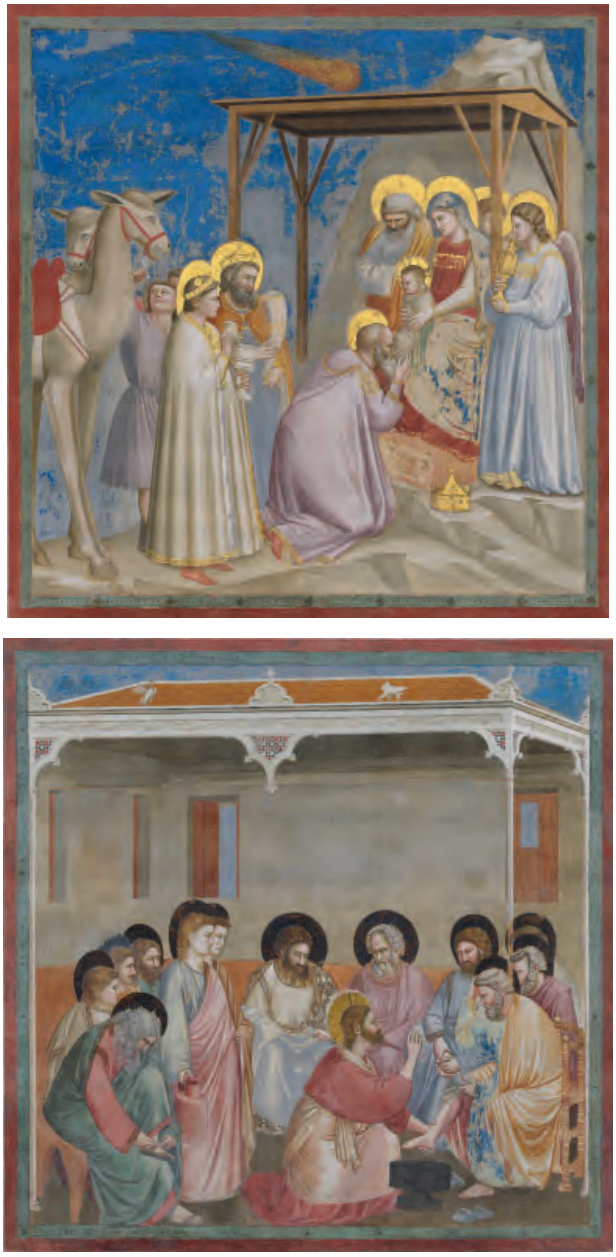

Fig. 2: Top: *The Adoration of the Magi*. Bottom: *The Washing of the Feet*.

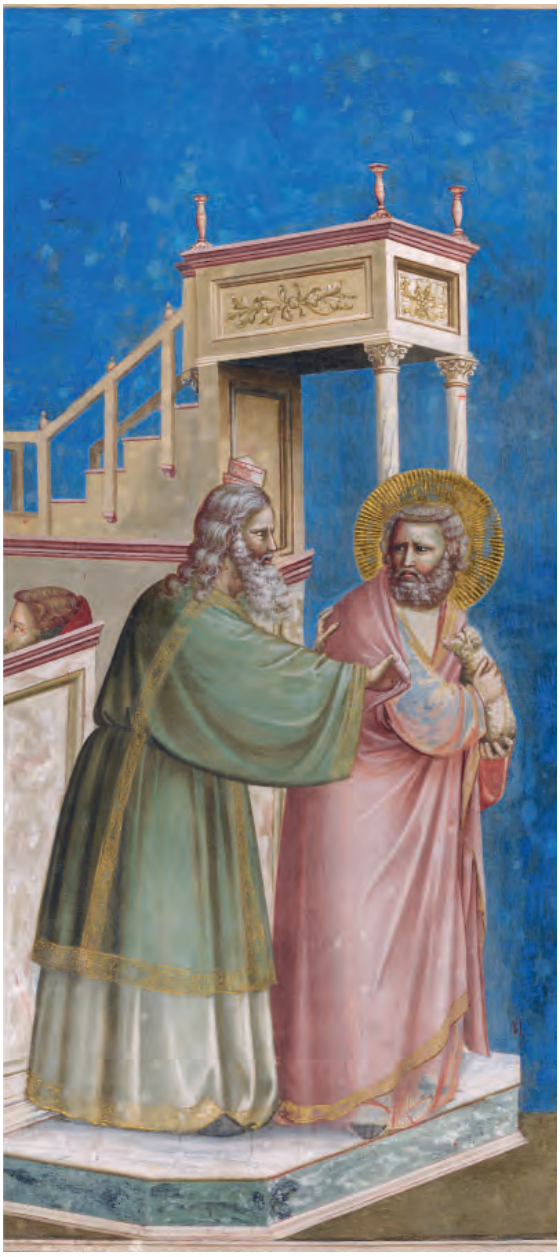

Fig. 3: *The Expulsion of Joachim* (detail).
(Su concessione del Comune di Padova – tutti i diritti di legge riservati)

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