

Amanda Laughery

Professor Woodward

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### Scholarly Essay Summary 1

Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona's essay, *Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb: the Program of Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua*, was published in *The Art Bulletin* in June 1998. This scholarly article explores the thematic program of Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel, commissioned by Enrico Scrovegni in the early fourteenth century. The authors argue that the fresco cycle contrasts the themes of usury and fertility, reflecting Enrico Scrovegni's attempt to atone for the family's legacy of financial sin<sup>1</sup>.

Derbes and Sandona contend that the frescoes establish a stark opposition between barren metal (usury) and the fruitful womb (fertility and redemption). They suggest that the pairing of frescoes, particularly *The Pact of Judas* and *The Visitation*, exemplifies this contrast: Judas' Betrayal, symbolizing ill-gotten wealth, is counterposed against the redemptive power of Mary's pregnancy<sup>2</sup>. The authors position this thematic structure within the broader context of medieval theological and economic discourse, demonstrating how Giotto's program serves both as a moral statement and as a deeply personal act of expiation for Scrovegni. The argument unfolds in several stages. First, the authors establish the historical and social background of the chapel's patron, Enrico Scrovegni, whose father was condemned as a usurer - a sign viewed with extreme severity in medieval Christian doctrine<sup>3</sup>. The authors then analyze the frescoes' iconographic pairings, illustrating how Giotto deliberately juxtaposed figures like Judas and Mary to

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<sup>1</sup> Derbes and Sandona, "Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998): 275

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 275

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 276

underscore moral oppositions<sup>4</sup>. Finally, they integrate textual and theological sources, including Aristotle, Aquinas, and Dante, to reinforce the idea that medieval society viewed usury as a perversion of natural order, directly opposed to the life-giving power of motherhood<sup>5</sup>.

Within the article, the authors interrelated several concepts. Usury as a Sin Against Nature, drawing from the Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy, the authors explain how medieval thinkers equated usury with unnatural reproduction - making money “breed” more money, an offense against divine law.<sup>6</sup> Another point is the Fertility as Spiritual Redemption, the opposing theme of fruitfulness is developed through Giotto’s depiction of Mary’s pregnancy, Joachim and Anna’s miraculous conception of the Virgin, and the visual prominence of children throughout the fresco cycle<sup>7</sup>. Throughout the article one of the concepts discussed is the Visual Juxtapositions and Moral Antithesis, the authors argue that Giotto structured the chapel’s imagery to reinforce moral oppositions, such as Judas vs Mary, Envy vs. Charity and the barren vs. the Fertile<sup>8</sup>.

To support the key points the author uses historical, visual, and literary sources. The essay discusses the economic and theological implications of usury in medieval Italy, noting that Enrico Scrovegni’s patronage of the chapel likely sought to cleanse the family’s reputation, along with how the pope used the chapel in the early 1300s to sell indulgences<sup>9</sup>. The authors also provide detailed examinations of the frescos breaking down *The Pact of Judas*, *The Visitation*, and *The Last Judgement*, showing how Giotto contrasts barren wealth with divine fecundity<sup>10</sup>. Lastly, the essay references key medieval texts, including *Dante’s Inferno*, where Dante went

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<sup>4</sup> Derbes and Sandona, "Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998): 278.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 278

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 276

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 278

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 276

into detail about how usurers in hell will have money bags placed around their necks, *Thomas Aquinas*' commentary on Aristotle and the Bonaventura's meditation on Mary's womb as the source of divine grace<sup>11</sup>.

The authors build upon the argument advanced by Ursule Schlegel, who first suggested that the Arena Chapel's frescos were intended as an act of atonement for Scrovegni's usurious past. However, Derbes and Sandona expand this thesis by proposing a more structured thematic opposition between ill-gotten wealth and sacred fertility. They also refine earlier interpretations by incorporating a broader range of textual sources and a more nuanced visual analysis<sup>12</sup>.

The essay itself was well-structured, with a clear introduction, a logically developed argument, and a compelling conclusion. The authors successfully integrate historical, theological, and artistic perspectives, making a persuasive case for their thesis. The use of evidence is particularly strong -the authors carefully connect Giotto's imagery to medieval attitudes toward money and morality. The analysis of visual elements, especially the *Pact of Judas* and *The Visitation*, convincingly supports their argument that Giotto's frescoes function as a moral counterpoint between sin and redemption. Additionally, their engagement with theological discourse, particularly Aristotle's notion of unnatural monetary increase, deepens their interpretation of the chapel's program. However, while the argument is persuasive, some readers may find the reliance on textual sources such as *Inferno* and theological commentaries somewhat speculative in relation to Giotto's intent. The essay assumes a high degree of intentionality on the part of the artist and patron, which, while plausible, is difficult to prove definitively.

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<sup>11</sup> Derbes and Sandona, "Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998): 276.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,277

Overall, Derbes and Sandona provide a compelling and meticulously researched interpretation of Giotto's Arena Chapel frescoes. Their thesis—that the chapel's imagery juxtaposes barren metal and the fruitful womb as a meditation on usury and redemption—is well-supported by historical, visual, and literary evidence. The essay successfully bridges art history and theological discourse, offering new insights into one of the most celebrated fresco cycles of the Italian Renaissance. While some aspects of their argument remain open to debate, their work contributes meaningfully to the scholarship on Giotto and medieval religious thought.

Work Cited:

Derbes, Anne, and Mark Sandona. "Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb: The Program of

Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua." *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998): 274–91.

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