Signature Killer: Caravaggio and the Poetics of Blood

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"Murder can be an art, too."—Rope, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1948

In the first Sherlock Holmes novel, A Study in Scarlet, the pipe-puffing crime solver is called to a house to help Scotland Yarders Gregson and Lestrade investigate a murder:

"There is no clue?" said Gregson.
"None at all," chimed in Lestrade.
Sherlock Holmes approached the body, and, kneeling down, examined it intently. "You are sure that there is no wound?" he asked, pointing to numerous gouts and splashes of blood which lay all round.
"Positive!" cried both detectives.
"Then, of course, this blood belongs to a second individual—presumably the murderer..."

But suddenly Lestrade discovered a clue on the wall (Fig. 1):

... there was scrawled in blood-red letters a single word—
RACHE

"What do you think of that?" cried the detective. . . .
"The murderer has written it with his or her own blood."

A cliché in pulp fiction and cinema, the victim of a homicide is shown lying face down in a pool of blood, looking for all the world as if he was about to write his killer’s name when he succumbed. Sometimes, as in the classic Alibi magazine cover by Lyman Anderson from 1934 featuring Henry Leyford Gates’s story "Written in Blood," the victim has just enough of a pulse left to write the first letters of the killer’s name before expiring (Fig. 2). Primitive in both its medium and technique, blood writing—like a dying confession—is regarded as the unarguable guarantor of truth.

In posters and book covers from the film noir era, graphic artists showed great invention in composing titles with a “written in blood” calligraphy. Time and again, blood drips profusely from the contours of outsize letters formed in a slightly gothic, menacing hand. The conceit evokes violence and victimization, but also clues, detection, and, ultimately, revenge. Indeed, as Holmes and Watson come to realize, the letters Ra-ch-e did not represent the incomplete spelling of the name of a female killer named Rachel, as Inspector Lestrade had first concluded, but the German word Rache—revenge.

In later novels and films (and in some sensational real-life cases), maniac killers use the victim’s blood to sign their deadly “masterpieces.” In the summer of 1946, University of Chicago student William Heirens, the notorious Lipstick Killer, terrorized the Windy City with a string of horrible murders. He taunted police by writing notes to them on his crime-scene walls using the blood-red lipstick of his victims.

These writing rituals in actual blood, or in the sexualized blood surrogate, red lipstick, establish the killer as both demonic and, in a demented way, creative.

Signed in Blood: Fra Michelangelo’s Beheading and the Oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato

No stranger to fusing the diabolical and the creative as a metaphor of artistic genius, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio invented one of the most brilliant conceits in seicento art when he signed his name "f.[ra] MichelAng[elo]" (brother Michelangelo), in the “blood” oozing from the Baptist’s severed neck in his picture for the Catholic military order of the Knights of Malta, The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (Fig. 3). The work was painted about the first half of 1608 as the altarpiece for the Knights’ recently completed oratory, dedicated to the beheaded Saint John the Baptist (S. Giovanni Decollato), attached to the Conventual Church of St. John in Valletta (Fig. 4). The monumental canvas—the largest of his career—was likely Caravaggio’s passaggio, the customary gift (usually money) a novice gave to the Order of St. John on being officially installed as a knight.

The oratory was founded in part by knights belonging to the Confraternita della Misericordia, which, like its counterpart at S. Giovanni Decollato in Rome (with which the group was affiliated), accompanied condemned prisoners to the gallows. Not long after it was completed, the hall (and its adjacent sacristy) also became the unique meeting place of the Sguardium, the Knights’ criminal tribunal. Over time, the oratory increasingly served as a place of instruction for the novices of the order, who even had their own theologian, ever at the ready, living in rooms nearby. The oratory also hosted meetings, investitures, and defrockings (including Caravaggio’s). But first and foremost it was a deeply spiritual place where Mass—accompanied by great music—was regularly celebrated, and where relics of John the Baptist were displayed on feast days. The function, design, and reception of Caravaggio’s altarpiece could not help but be influenced by the oratory’s wide-ranging activities and audiences. The predicament that had brought Caravaggio to the heavily fortified island—homicide, exile, the search for a pardon—and his experiences with the rich culture of the Knights once he had settled there also shaped his pictorial ideas.

Caravaggio was made a brother of the Order of Knights Hospitaller of St. John of Jerusalem (as the Knights of Malta were officially called) on July 14, 1608, after having resided on the island for the requisite year of his novitiate. During this long (and, for Caravaggio, oddly peaceful) period, he probably participated in the religious and military exercises undertaken by all men aspiring to the white eight-pointed cross and black habit. His signature almost certainly dates to a moment immediately after his investiture, since it was
unthinkable, in this most hierarchical of institutions, for a novice to declare his membership before having received the habit. The canvas was likely dedicated on August 29, the feast day of St. John’s Decollation, the oratory’s titular.

Like the artist, who fled Rome after murdering his rival, the swordsman Ranuccio Tomassoni, in May 1606 and who was defrocked in Malta following a brawl on August 18, 1608, the canvas itself has suffered its share of crime and punishment. Much of the bottom of the painting, including the area of the signature, was severely damaged on April 25, 1989, during an attempted theft. The canvas was restored in Florence between 1997 and 1999. A comparison of before-and-after photographs (Figs. 5, 6) reveals that a significant amount of inpainting was done by the Florentine restorers, not only to the newly slashed area through the signature but also to the large, somewhat circular lacuna that, in its entirety or partially, once formed part of the puddle of blood. Technical analysis done by the Istituto Centrale del Restauro (ICR) in Rome in 1955-57, when the canvas received its first modern restoration, proved that the signature is integral to the original paint layer and was not added at a later moment. Already by 1616, the signature had been noted by a French visitor to Malta.

The painting, with its powerful juxtapositions of masses and voids, bone-chillingly austere architecture, and dramatic contrasts of light and dark, centers on the executioner—perched like an animal above his prey—as he reaches back for his dagger to finish the deadly operation (Fig. 6). He is about to separate the head from the body so that it can be presented to the serving girl. Just a moment before, he had killed John with a large sword, which now lies discarded on the ground to the left of the saint’s head. Its razor-sharp blade, wiped clean of blood, gleams in the foreground, demanding to be recognized for the service it has given. The action Caravaggio has chosen to depict is incomplete: the executioner’s motion is arrested just as he begins his second offensive. Consequently, the picture’s audience is stranded between two horribly violent moments. Suspended, as it were, between sword and knife, we are left in a kind of limbo, a limbo not unlike that experienced by Caravaggio, a fugitive from justice—career on hold—stuck on a small, rocky island in the middle of the Mediterranean, waiting, impatiently, for time itself to begin again.

Caravaggio’s signature, the only signature he is known to have painted, has been interpreted as an act of contrition for the murder he committed in Rome and as a manifestation of the painter’s fixation on death. In Herwarth Röttgen’s
Howard Hibbard, while rightly recognizing “Caravaggio’s pride in attaining the honor he had sought so assiduously,” calls the nature and placement of the signature “almost pathological, and they seem to confirm our suspicions of Caravaggio’s identification with the Baptist and of his unusual preoccupation with beheading.”27

But it is unlikely that Caravaggio would choose this, of all moments and places, when he finally had the opportunity to turn his life around, to bring up his criminal past or brood about his mortality. In my interpretation, Michelangelo Merisi came to the island, giving up a lucrative career as an altarpiece painter in Naples, to provide meritorious service to the Sacra Religione (as the Order of St. John was frequently called) in hopes of receiving an honorary knighthood. He would have known well beforehand, from his friends and patrons in Rome and Naples, that such distinguished membership could likely be leveraged, in the form of letters of recommendation from the grand master, the elected head of the order, into a papal pardon for his 1606 crime.28 Malta, therefore, was Caravaggio’s pathway to freedom. Rather than an act of contrition, then, the signature “in blood” is an affirmation of Caravaggio’s new status as a brother in the oldest, most powerful of the crusading orders. A celebration
Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, detail showing the restored canvas (photograph © The St. John’s Co-Cathedral Foundation and Midsea Books)
of new social standing, the signature is also, as we shall see momentarily, a demonstration of the power of art.29

Both politics and poetics, it can be argued, played an important role in the genesis and form of Caravaggio’s sanguineous inscription. It was the Maltese context—the particular circumstances of the commission and Caravaggio’s tenuous relationship to the order—that gave rise to the signature. Thus, any hope of decoding its meaning must begin with the picture’s knightly community and Caravaggio’s place within it. By contrast, the poetic aspects of the signature seem more in the vein of Caravaggio’s intellectually sophisticated, self-reflective Roman works. His clever inscription makes an important, hitherto unexamined contribution to the emerging literary and artistic style of concettismo, the witty, metaphoric language of Baroque poetry. Though the two interpretations are distinct, they are united in highlighting Caravaggio’s habit of inventing novel ways of establishing his presence in his own paintings. Together they provide new insights into Caravaggio’s evolving concept of his role as an artist.

Bloodlines
Perhaps one of Caravaggio’s first works for the convento, as Malta was called by members of the order, the Saint Jerome Writing of late 1607 or early 1608 was almost certainly painted for the Knights’ prior of Naples, Fra Ippolito Malaspina, the Religion’s admiral and pilier (head) of the Italian Langue (Fig. 7).30 We know that Malaspina at least owned the work because of his prominent coat of arms (stemma) in the lower right corner (Fig. 8).31

As Caravaggio would have immediately understood from Malaspina and his fellow knights, heraldry was (and, to an extent, still is today) the lingua franca of Malta and the order. In Justus Sustermans’s Portrait of Fra Francesco dell’Antella, which depicts the learned Florentine patron of Caravaggio’s Malta-period Sleeping Cupid, as much care has been lavished on the stemmi of the four quarters of his noble ancestry as on his costume (Fig. 9).32 Coats of arms helped tell the story of who came to the island and earned a knighthood; who sacrificed his life for the order during the Great Siege of 1565; who was elected grand master; who constructed an addition to the fortifications, built an aqueduct, or sponsored the decoration of a chapel. It related family history, national history, alliances, ambitions. No frontispiece, bookbinding, flag, majolica pharmacy jar, vestment, or map from this period lacks a family stemma. Visitors to Malta today cannot fail to be impressed by the ultimate expression of this “arms race,” the hundreds of inlaid marble tombs that make up the entire floor of the Conventual Church (known today as the Co-Cathedral of St. John) and the oratory (Fig. 10). Most of these tombs belong to the late seicento or early settecento, but the dynastic, fraternal, and martyrial spirit that gave rise to them was centuries old.33 Founded in the eleventh century and still active today, the Order of St. John is an international military-religious order of Catholic nobles. Coats of arms have been integral to their identity and the construction of their history for nearly a millennium.

When knights were installed, as represented in Philippe Thomassin’s engraving in the Statuta Hospitālis Hierusalem (1586–88), they took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience (Fig. 11).34 Like monks, they were not allowed to leave proper wills: only one-fifth of their belongings, the quinto or dispropriamento, could be set aside.35 Four-fifths of a knight’s possessions—his spoglio—passed directly into the order when he died and was then distributed to various branches of the organization by the president of the Comun Tesoro.36 This rich legacy no doubt contributed to the heraldomania of the order, since these childless cavalieri wanted their noble family
names to live on through the objects they left to the *convento*. The example of Fra Ippolito Malaspina, who donated the *Saint Jerome Writing* and three other paintings (each with his *stemma*) to the Chapel of the Italian Langue and whose tomb in the chapel also bears his coat of arms, is just one of hundreds of cases that could be adduced on this important topic. It should be noted that the grand masters prohibited their personal coats of arms from ever being removed from the projects they constructed.

Caravaggio was not of noble blood. But this did not stop him from parading around Rome, sword at his side, as if he were a peer of his patrons. His arrogant behavior got him into serious trouble with the law, since nonnobles were prohibited from carrying arms in Rome without a special license. One can easily imagine how becoming a member of a grand chivalric order, with its requirement that he, as a proper knight, carry a sword through the streets of Valletta, would have stirred in Caravaggio feelings of both pride and vindication. Something of that sense informs the portrait of Caravaggio as a Knight of Malta, published by Giovan Pietro Bellori with his vita of the artist in 1672 (Fig. 12). Yet a black habit, an eight-pointed cross, and a sword do not make one noble. Indeed, when it came to Merisi’s supposed gift to the order in thanks for a special knighthood—the altarpiece of *The Beheading of Saint John*—his lack of nobility would have been more obvious than ever to his fellow knights and novices in Malta. His masterpiece is missing a coat of arms. Caravaggio probably braced himself for the inevitable insults such a lacuna (and his precarious situation) would invite. Some of the knights surely must have wondered how a mere painter, who earned his living making and selling art, had managed to curry favor with the grand master and become “one of us.” The rules were all designed to prevent it.
To become a full-fledged knight, called a Knight of Justice or Cavaliere di Giustizia, required proving noble ancestry as far back as sixteen quarters (four generations), depending on the langue. As mandated by statute, the applicant had to submit a family tree with coats of arms as part of his prove di nobiltà, or proofs of nobility (Fig. 13). The grand master and his Sovereign Council dispatched delegates to archives in the applicant’s hometown to check the accuracy of the proofs and to ensure that no one in his family had practiced a trade or had Moorish or Jewish blood. Baptismal records were copied out; witnesses were interviewed.

Given Caravaggio’s competitiveness on all fronts—he reputedly threatened to split Guido Reni’s skull for stealing his style—it hardly seems a stretch to imagine that in Malta he would have had an enormous chip on his shoulder in the midst of Europe’s noble “glitterati,” many of them, incidentally, one-third his age. The title of Cavaliere di Obbedienza Magistrale (knight of magistral obedience) conferred on Caravaggio per grazia (special favor) by the reigning grand master, Alof de Wignacourt (r. 1601–22), was controversial, and in fact had been banned by the Chapter General of the order in 1604. Wignacourt had to get special permission from Pope Paul V Borghese in order to bestow on the painter this honorary, second-class title typically given to nonnobles. He also had to secure a second waiver from the pope, since murderers were by statute prohibited from joining the order. In this strained context, in which Caravaggio had to suffer the dual humiliation of a papal intervention for both his homicidal and nonnoble defects, the artist’s “fra Michelangelo” signature is a shrewd defense of his own honor, one that moves the discourse about noble bloodlines into an arena in which he can compete.

This was not Rome. In the Eternal City, where the social status of top artists had reached great heights in the wake of Raphael and Michelangelo, Caravaggio had been feted by Cardinal del Monte, Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, the Crescenzi, and the Mattei. Malta, however, was in many ways a military base, where defending Christendom from the Turks or properly calculating seniority for promotions were more likely topics of debate than the recent breakthroughs in naturalism of the Carracci and Caravaggio. Though Wignacourt had Caravaggio paint his portrait (now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris) and perhaps fancied the Lombard to be his court artist, not everyone on the island, as I have speculated, would have thought Caravaggio deserved a knighthood. Anticipating the skeptical knight who would scan The Beheading of Saint John for the donor’s coat of arms or otherwise
question his merit, Caravaggio, through his signature in blood, built in a ready response: “here are my bloodlines, my proofs of nobility, descended directly, through faith and dutiful service—through the virtù of my art—from the precious blood of our martyred patron saint, John the Baptist.”

Caravaggio’s antiheraldic/antinobility rhetoric of the triumph of faith (as expressed through great devotional art) over family ties could not be clearer. He was not to be alone in stressing the importance of faith as a binding force. Albeit promoting a far more conventional idea, a fascinating print from Fra Christian von Osterhausen’s 1650 commentary on the Statutes actually comes surprisingly close to one aspect of Caravaggio’s argument. The plate, in the form of the requisite family tree submitted with all proofs of nobility, presents a compelling allegory about the Sacra Religione (Fig. 14). Set against a bird’s-eye view of Valletta and the Three Cities and accompanied by a praying knight kneeling before Christ on the Cross, the image shows the template for sixteen quarters of noble lineage. In a classic piece of propaganda, Osterhausen would have us believe that the Knights of Malta not only have noble bloodlines—shown here as genealogical branches—but also that they run directly through the Holy Cross, indeed, are made of the very same wood. For Osterhausen, the “family” of the Knights of Malta—the brotherhood itself—is linked as much by faith as by nobility.

Caravaggio’s Blood

Caravaggio’s bold signature also summons the idea of faith by its obvious allusion to the last act of the Dominican Saint Peter of Verona (Saint Peter Martyr), as shown, for example, in Vincenzo Foppa’s fresco in S. Eustorgio, Milan. Just before dying, Peter writes the first word of the credo (“credó in unum deum”) in his own blood (Fig. 15). Caravaggio writes

13 Family tree submitted with proofs of nobility for Antonio Maurizio Solaro, ca. 1680–89, watercolor, ink, with gold leaf, 23 3/4 × 30 3/4 in. (59 × 78 cm). Archivio di Stato, Turin, Archivio Alfieri, m. 82, fasc. 23 (document in the public domain; photograph provided by the Archivio di Stato, Turin)

14 Attributed to Wolfgang Kilian, Christ on the Cross with a Praying Knight, illustration from Fra Christian von Osterhausen, Eigentlicher und gründlicher Bericht, Augsburg, 1650, pl. 2, engraving, 4 3/8 × 6 3/4 in. (12.5 × 15.8 cm). Library, Magistral Palace, S.M.O.M., Rome (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the author)

15 Vincenzo Foppa, Martyrdom of Saint Peter of Verona, detail, ca. 1464–68, fresco. Portinari Chapel, S. Eustorgio, Milan (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Scala / Art Resource, NY)
in John's blood, not his own, but he simultaneously lays claim to the red paint itself as something distinctly his, something that he invented and in a sense suffered for. The signature is Caravaggio's "final act" in his magnum opus.59

While the Peter Martyr episode, as represented by Renaissance artists, was undoubtedly an important visual and iconographic source for Caravaggio's signature, the artist would have also been familiar with the metaphor of writing in blood from religious tracts and from Christian writers such as Saint Catherine of Siena (d. 1380).60 Her letters, replete with an astonishing variety of blood metaphors, many of them in the context of crusades and knights, invariably begin: "Dearest son, in the name of Christ sweet Jesus. I Catarina, servant and slave of those who serve Jesus Christ, write to you in his precious blood [Carissimo figliuolo in Cristo dolce Gesù. Io Catarina, serva e schiava de' servi di Gesù Cristo, scrivo a te nel prezioso sangue suo]."61 It is possible that there were secular literary traditions in Italy, as yet unidentified, he also drew on. These may have been similar to the well-known "written in blood" motifs in Elizabethan literature. A brief excursus recalls two of these classic inventions.

Perhaps the most familiar scene of this type on the English stage was written by the author of The Jew of Malta, Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593). The incident occurs in his play The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus (first performed in 1594; first edition, 1604). Marlowe, whose turbulent life could serve as a prequel to Caravaggio’s, took the work’s theme of a pact with the Devil from the old German legend.62 In act 1, scene 5, to cement his bargain with Lucifer, Faustus is told by Mephistopheles to "write a deed of gift with thine own blood." Faustus agrees but then encounters technical difficulties partway through. He complains, "My blood congeals and I can write no more!" But Mephistopheles is undeterred: "I'll fetch thee fire to dissolve it straight." The heating of the wound works, and Faustus completes his writing: "So, now my blood begins to clear again. Now will I make an end immediately."

Blood is everywhere in the first of the great revenge plays, The Spanish Tragedy, published in 1592 by Marlowe’s former friend and roommate Thomas Kyd (1558–1594). Bel-Imperia, the love interest of the murdered Horatio, is locked away by his assassins to prevent her from alerting authorities. While in prison, she pens a letter written in her own blood and secretly sends it to Horatio’s father, Hieronimo, the marshal of Spain, informing him of the identity of the true murderers.

In Faustus, blood writing is made macabre and leads to damnation. The motif, nonetheless, confers the idea of writing in blood as a higher order of commitment than using simple ink, one that binds the body and soul to a cause. Interestingly, in The Spanish Tragedy, Bel-Imperia’s blood letter is a symbol meant to show that truth and love can triumph over murder and imprisonment. Evil bloodshed, which begins the narrative, is vanquished by the virtuous shedding of blood (the letter) to seek retribution for murder.64

“Spargere Sangue per la Religione”

Martyrdom is often referred to in patristic writings as a baptism of blood, a rebirth through death. The concept is doubly poignant when the martyr in question is none other than John the Baptist himself. As I have written elsewhere, John the Baptist must be considered the “first fallen Knight” of the Order of St. John.65 He was an exemplum of sacrifice for all those warrior-religious—especially the novices—who heard sermons, attended tribunals, or participated in investiture ceremonies in the Oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato, built above a portion of the old camposanto (cemetery) where, among others, the heroes of the Great Siege were buried.66

Sacrifice was part of the spiritual culture of the Knights as well as a reality. “Spargere sangue per la Religione” (shedding blood for the Order)—these are words invoked daily by Grand Master Wignacourt in his diplomatic correspondence, emphasizing for recalcitrant heads of state the sacrifices made by brothers fulfilling their carovane on the galleys in dangerous, Turk-filled waters.67

Situated directly over the altar, Caravaggio’s baptism of blood functions in a figurative sense as a tributary stream of salvation, joining the “true ocean”—the blood of Christ—when Mass is performed in front of his painting. Speaking of early medieval interpretations of Christ’s blood as both sacrificial and life-giving, Caroline Walker Bynum has observed:
Patristic writers elaborated these New Testament themes to make blood a central element in their theories of redemption. Already by the early third century, Tertullian stressed the bloodiness of Christ's death more than the gospels had done, connecting sanguis Christi to martyrdom as well as to eucharist and baptism. To Tertullian, the spilling of blood was crucial to salvation, but what he emphasized above all were the positive effects of bloodshed: cleansing, sealing, freeing, protecting, restoring, vivifying, inebriating, reinstating, redeeming.

One might compare Caravaggio's subtle idea of a small burst of salvific blood (the holy precursor's) to the full-blown realization of such a conceit in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Sanguis Christi, especially as executed by Guglielmo Cortese in his technicolor treatment of about 1670 (now in the Museo di Roma, Rome). Better known through François Spierre's engraving (Fig. 16), Bernini's flying Crucifixion is a majestic Roman Baroque fountain, filling the oceans of the world with Christ's blood. The martyrial-baptismal-Eucharistic triad in Caravaggio's altarpiece, which several scholars have discussed, is amplified by the blood red drapery worn by the decapitated Baptist and by his lambskin mantle, with its two pathetic hooves lying inert in the foreground. Signing his name in the blood of the Baptist suggests that through membership in the Order of St. John, Caravaggio himself is being reborn—rechristened with a new name: fra Michelangelo.

Some scholars have insisted on reading the bloody signature as Caravaggio's way of signaling to Wignacourt and the order his remorse for killing Tomassoni, but such an interpretation seems unconvincing given both the form and the context of the gesture. There is nothing self-effacing or expiatory about this bold and gruesome signature, which draws attention to Caravaggio's stature as a Knight of Malta while simultaneously promoting him as a daring, novel pictorial genius. The last thing anyone in Malta wanted to reflect on, especially Wignacourt, would have been Caravaggio's criminality. From the centrality, size, and violence of this audacious signature, one might also be permitted to interpret Caravaggio's "blood oath" to the Knights and his flaunting of his title as expressions of victory (not remorse) over the tragic events that had nearly derailed his career. If his goal was expiation, it could not have been a serious one. On August 18, 1608, a few weeks, perhaps just days, after he completed his signature, Caravaggio participated in a serious tumulo (brawl) in Valletta in which a senior knight was gravely wounded.
unique style and iconography. The fact that The Beheading of Saint John is the only work Caravaggio signed in his career suggests that Malta played a significant role in the decision to inscribe the canvas. The impetus for the signature “in blood” was the unique circumstance of Caravaggio’s joining a brotherhood of blue bloods rather than a sudden need to authenticate a picture or advertise his name to future patrons, as his Lombard and Venetian predecessors had done with their calling-card cartellini.75

In some Renaissance works, the cartellino is the record of a humble gesture. The fictive paper used for the inscription often looks as if it had been folded up and carried around in the artist’s pocket for several days before umiltà was overcome and he reluctantly agreed to reveal his identity. The trompe l’oeil cartellino signature, as an early Madonna and Child by Giovanni Bellini (Fig. 17), is typically not a part of the narrative. It often floats above the picture space as an afterthought or as a small votive offering attached precariously to the exterior of a parapet or fictive frame. The slightest breeze could blow it away and deliver the artist’s name to oblivion.76

Another type of signature frequently encountered in the Renaissance is the integrated inscription, typically situated on a building or a fragment of architecture. Titian’s Averoldi Polyptych is a perfect example of this second tradition (Fig. 18). We are to imagine the artist having passed through the landscape—before we arrived on the scene—and neatly inscribed his name on a fallen column under Saint Sebastian’s foot. Albrecht Dürer’s witty monograms function in much the same way.77 Whereas the cartellino gives a hint that the painting we behold is just an object, the integrated inscription does just the opposite, preserving the “window onto reality.”

Caravaggio reinvents the Renaissance signature by making it flow, literally and figuratively, from the narrative itself toward the picture plane (Figs. 19, 3, 6). It unites the deep perspective space of the floor—and the pool of blood that lies in scorcio (in foreshortening) on it—with the flat pictorial surface. Art seamlessly meets reality. Moreover, Caravaggio’s signature exaggerates that reality by so artfully making such an obviously artless signature. But what is the purpose of collapsing the world of the image and the world of the artist/spectator through a signature?

A recurring theme in Caravaggio’s religious works is the notion of the artist as eyewitness to the scenes he paints. In The Betrayal of Christ (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin), for example, Caravaggio casts himself as a curious, lantern-bearing part of a mob.78 Rather than simple acts of devotion comparable to the Renaissance habit of inserting self-portraits into religious paintings in the guise of a fashionable bystander, Caravaggio’s appearances are dramatic, personal, and unflattering.79 Above all, they are manifestations of his singular commitment to truth in his naturalistic religious art. He bodily inhabits the scenes he portrays, “verifying” what he paints for us. In The Beheading of Saint John, Caravaggio expands his repertoire of self-portraits by inventing a new way of putting himself, as it were, into the picture. He insists on his credentials as a witness of the execution, for the blood of Saint John is still fresh enough that the artist can use it to paint his signature, “fra Michel’Angelo.”

This conceit about time, space, and the artist’s body would not be effective without the genius of Caravaggio’s style and technique in handling the signature, which resembles a bold, transgressive act of graffiti rather than a finely crafted, elegant signature done in the calm of the studio. Rough, blocky, and uneven, the brushstrokes seem hurried. Their appearance confirms what the iconography tells us: this is blood, not oil paint. (With the passing of centuries and the erosion of the final letters from overcleaning, the signature now suggests even more the physicality of blood, since it seems, by means of this fortuitous accident, that two-thirds of the way through Caravaggio’s name, the blood congealed.)80

In a wonderful chiastic conceit, Caravaggio turns paint into blood and then in turn uses that blood “to paint.” The process of making this conceit—perhaps using a stiff, broad brush—is nearly indistinguishable from the act represented. This is a new, completely unexpected dimension of Caravaggio’s realism, based on wit rather than illusion.

Knighthood Virtuosity: Caravaggio and Marino

The language of concettismo Caravaggio wields here invites comparison with the swashbuckling wordplay of early seicento poetry. As is well known, Caravaggio was a friend of the greatest Italian writer of the age, Cavalier Giambattista Marino (1569–1625), the poet of meraviglia, the marvelous.81 Caravaggio even painted his portrait, though the work is lost.82 Thanks to recent scholarship comparing Marino and Caravaggio, we can better appreciate the similarities between the personalities and concepts of these two competitive, self-promoting knights whose art has often been seen as wholly divergent.83

Caravaggio’s early works engage themes and rhetorical strategies popularized by the brilliant poet, though the painter seems to have come up with his ideas independently, perhaps in response to some of the same lyrical traditions Marino reinvented in his writing. The sophisticated madrigal culture nurtured by del Monte and Giustiniani exposed Caravaggio to facets of this literary world several years before he met Marino. Their friendship, begun in Rome about 1600, surely expanded Caravaggio’s knowledge, introduced him to Marino’s boundless wit, and resulted in a real exchange of ideas—perhaps even ignited a bit of rivalry. As Elizabeth Cropper has suggested, the poet, who left Rome in 1605, was dazzled by the originality of Caravaggio’s paintings and their ability to address and control the spectator, to stop time, and to create visual and emotional paradoxes that draw attention to virtuosity.84

Marino’s interest in these themes is most apparent in his celebrated opus La galeria, published in Venice in 1619 but begun much earlier, almost certainly in the years he and Caravaggio knew each other.85 His “museum” of sonnets and madrigals, each dedicated to individual works of art (both real and imagined), includes responses to famous paintings by Caravaggio, Annibale Carracci, Guido Reni, the Cavalier d’Arpino, and dozens of others.

The Galeria takes the Horatian concept of ut pietura poesis to its logical conclusion, trying to unite the sister arts of poetry and painting. Though the theorist Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo said they were nearly twins (“quasi nate ad un parto”), the sisters were hardly identical. Renaissance theorists frequently invoked the phrase made famous by Plutarch (attributed by
Caravaggio, The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist, detail showing the signature (photograph © The St. John’s Co-Cathedral Foundation and Midsea Books)

him to Simonides) that painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture (or, in Lomazzo’s phrase, “poesia mutola” and “pittura loquace,” respectively). Mariano astounds by turning the theory on its head: his collection of paintings and sculptures “speak”—as ekphrastic poems—thus demonstrating the author’s ability to transcend established boundaries and to reverse traditional relationships. Many of the poems in the Galeria feature Ovidian themes of metamorphosis, but the latter are often just a pretext for Mariano to flaunt his skills as a magician. With one deft turn of phrase, he can cause ideas and objects to morph, and our entire frame of reference to shift with them. Having painted an entire gallery of pictures—some, notably, of his own invention—not with brushes and color but solely with pen and ink, Mariano raised the bar in the ongoing paragone between poetry and painting. Surely the poet would have considered Caravaggio, whose Beheading of Saint John features writing as both text and image, a worthy adversary in this contest.

While the two geniuses have much in common, especially the polemicizing of their own originality, I would emphasize that they achieved meraviglia in virtually opposite styles. Whereas Mariano daringly piles one metaphor on another, Caravaggio’s conceits are compact; they barely disturb the realist fabric of his canvases. Mariano’s language is highly artificial. His poems rarely if ever achieve the drama and psychological depth of Caravaggio’s paintings. Both men, though, as we shall see, demonstrate a heightened self-consciousness concerning the role of the artist and a particular fascination with the affective power of his medium, the seduction of violence, and the treachery of illusion.

The Painter as Executioner

19 Caravaggio, The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist, detail showing the signature (photograph © The St. John’s Co-Cathedral Foundation and Midsea Books)

ghese David with the Head of Goliath, which arguably dates to 1606, is worthy of Mariano himself (Fig. 20). This picture, in which Caravaggio portrays himself as victim—as the decapitated Goliath—paradoxically shows the severed head as defiant, with a petrifying gaze, even after death. It is the spectator, not Caravaggio/Goliath, who is left immobilized with fear. The canvas has sometimes been said to contain Merisi’s initials on the groove of the sword (such inscriptions on weapons in pictures were not unprecedented). If the letters can be transcribed as M.A.C.O., then they likely serve as abbreviations for Micheli Angeli Caravaggio Opus (work of Michelangelo da Caravaggio). Maurizio Marini has shown, however, that a more likely transcription of the letters is H-AS O. S., an abbreviation for Saint Augustine’s gloss on the David story, humilitas occidit superbiam (humility slayeth pride).

However one deciphers the inscription, the sword—and nearly everything else about Caravaggio’s canvas—sparked the imagination of Orazio Gentileschi for his Executioner with the Head of Saint John the Baptist, painted in about 1612–13 (Fig. 21). Orazio’s work is signed on the sword, hor.h.s lomi (Horatius Lomi), using his proper surname. He thus pretends he is the armorer who made the sword that slew the Baptist, revealing his authorship of the painting only obliquely through the convention of the integrated inscription. As code for the artist and his “weapon” (the paintbrush), Orazio’s inscription establishes a poetic link between the execution and its representation. He may very well have viewed the Borghese David with the Head of Goliath in just this light, as a classic performance of Caravaggio’s terribilità in which the Lombard painter posited David’s sword as a metonymy for the artist’s brush and its capacity to render violence.

The metaphor of swords for brushes is a standard one in
Marino’s poetry. It is used in a poem from La galeria in which he describes a painting by Fulminetto (Martin Frémiguet) of the suicides of Pyramus and Thisbe, the star-crossed lovers who inspired the story of Romeo and Juliet. The tragedy is caused by a misreading of bloody evidence.

Neighbors in adjoining houses in ancient Babylon, Pyramus and Thisbe are forbidden to wed by their parents, but the youths discover a crack in the wall that separates them and through it confess their love. They agree to meet under a white mulberry tree. Thisbe arrives first but spies a lioness with a mouth bloody from a recent hunt. She takes flight, losing her veil. The lioness tears the veil and covers it in blood. Pyramus arrives, sees the bloodied veil, and believes his beloved has been killed. Blaming himself, he falls on his sword, staining the mulberry tree with his blood. Thisbe returns to discover the body of Pyramus; in despair, she uses his sword to unite them in death. The purple color of the mulberry tree stands as a memorial to their tragic story:

Un inganno v’uccise,
o in tenera età fermi e costanti
ma sventurati amanti.
Or in più strane guise,
di diletto cagione, e non d’affanno,
vi dà vita un inganno.
Ma dove ha maggior forza, in questo o in quello,
o la spada, o ’l pennello?

Là velo e sangue, e qui tela e colore,
l’uno è de l’Arte, e l’altro fu d’Amore.

(A deception killed you, oh, of tender age, firm and constant but ill-fated lovers. Now in stranger forms, cause for delight and not anguish, a deception gives you life. But which has the greater force, this or that, the sword or the paintbrush? There veil and blood, and here canvas and color, one is of Art, and the other was of Love.)

Marino’s poem creates clever symmetries between the words spada and pennello (sword and paintbrush), as well as between sangue and colore (blood and paint). It also contains meaningful double entendres in the use of the word inganno (deception). The first inganno, Thisbe’s velo (veil), in my reading a kind of accidental “canvas” painted in blood, results in two deaths. The very word “veil” suggests dissimulation. Paradoxically, the second inganno, Frémiguet’s canvas, brings the dead lovers back to life. Marino, fascinated by the multiple nature of words and concepts, never tires of showing off his virtuosity by revealing to us their unexpected relations. This poem and many others in the Galeria prove that Art has the “maggior forza”; it can deceive like Love but also has the power to resurrect and immortalize.
Another poem in the *Galeria*, this one dedicated to a *Portrait of Julius Caesar*, is a showpiece of verbal pyrotechnics and chiastic somersaults. Where Caravaggio plays between painting and writing in *The Beheading of Saint John* (sword and brush in the *David*), Marino here takes on the pen and the sword. In the hands of the historian-warrior Caesar, the sword writes notes in “sanguinosi inchiostri”—bloody inks:

Spada la penna e penna al gran Romano
la spada fu; con l’una e l’altra vinse.
La spada in vive note il monte e ’l piano
di sanguinosi inchiostri asperse e tine.
La penna mosse da guerriera mano
Morte omicida immortalmente estinse.
Si che con doppio onor tra studi e risse
la penna guerreggiò, la spada scrisse.

(Sword the pen and pen for the great Roman was the sword; with one and the other he conquered. The sword in living notes sprinkled and stained hill and plain with sanguineous inks. The pen moved by martial hand immor-
tally extinguished Murderous death. Thus with double honor, between studies and skirmishes the pen fought, the sword wrote.)

Weaponizing the kind of Baroque hyperbole for which he is justly famous (and sometimes justly censured), Marino ag-
grandizes the role of the writer and, by extension, all artists, to Olympian dimensions. With a mere pen (though bran-
dished with rapier wit), he can conquer Death itself, achiev-
ing immortality.

The violent metaphors in “Pyramus and Thisbe” and “Ju-
lius Caesar” parallel many of the conceits we have observed in Caravaggio’s bloody signature. Marino’s poetry, as demon-
strated further below, also focuses our attention on perhaps the most important and shocking of the inscription’s poten-
tial claims: that Caravaggio not only executed John the Bap-
tist artistically but is also responsible for the saint’s murder. It helps to know that in seicento Italian, the word *esecuzione* was used to signify the performance of a decapitation as well as the execution of a work of art.

This was not Caravaggio’s first offense. Through his famous self-portrait in the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* in the Conta-
relli Chapel, Rome (Figs. 22, 23), Caravaggio assumes autho-
rial guilt in the guise of a witness who, while fleeing, looks back in sadness at the murder of Matthew, a tragedy that he, the “author of this play,” has devised and failed to halt. Similarly, in the Borghese canvas, Caravaggio claims agency for his own (Goliath’s) decapitation through the pity ex-
pressed by David and possibly also through the conceit of the sword as paintbrush (Fig. 20). As the writer and singer of the psalms—as author—David can be interpreted here as the artist’s surrogate. The inscription in *The Beheading of Saint John* would have Caravaggio once again assume the role of the witness/author who is ultimately culpable for the atrocity we see before us.
Caravaggio, Martyrdom of Saint Matthew, detail showing a self-portrait of Caravaggio (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Scala / Art Resource, NY)

Such clever and morbid meraviglia on the theme of authorial responsibility and agency immediately brings to mind the opening lines of Marino’s most famous poem from the Galleria, dedicated to Guido Reni’s painting The Massacre of the Innocents of about 1610–12 (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna). Here the poet chastises the painter for his creative recklessness:

Che fai Guido? che fai?
La man, che forme angeliche dipigne,
tratta or opre sanguigne?
Non vedi tu, che mentre il sanguinoso
stuol de’ fanciulli ravivando vai
nova morte gli dai?

(What are you doing Guido? What are you doing? The hand that paints angelic forms now treats bloody works? Don’t you see that by calling back to life the bloodied band of children you are giving them a new death?)

Coinciding with his recent investiture, Caravaggio’s bloody signature articulates that the “new death,” the “nova morte” of his freshly executed Saint John, has resulted in his own personal resurrection—a knighthood, the possibility of a par-
don, and, of course, new fame. Caravaggio’s signature is a proud defense of his honor in the face of the noble world of the Order of St. John and a conceit about the artist’s role in making a painting. He is both executioner and witness, maker and destroyer. The paradoxes in the artist’s works are matched only by those in his actual life, a murderer who became the greatest painter of his age, a nonnoble who became a member of a chivalric order.

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Notes

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3. I should point out (though spoiling the ending) that in H. L. Gates’s story, while the police are convinced that the name written in blood on the wall is that of the killer, it turns out to refer to someone else connected with the case. Here, and in many other stories, and as pioneered in A Study in Scarlet, the average police inspector—like the average reader—jumps to the conclusion that names written in blood indicate the murderer. Tellingly, despite the fact that writers continually prove that our initial assumption about these signatures is wrong, we continue to believe in the basic premise. It seems to have an almost primeval meaning for us. Caravaggio’s signature, of course, is not part of a film noir or pulp-fiction plot, and I am not suggesting we read it in such a modern, anachronistic way. Nonetheless, as I explain below, his witty inscription employs literary conceits familiar to early modern audiences that establish the author as complicit in the violence he represents.


5. A famous police photo shows Heirens’s pathetic plea written with his victim’s lipstick on the bedroom wall: “For hAvens akke cAcht me BeFore I kill mo re I cAnnot control myseIf.”

6. Years ago it was suggested by some scholars that the “f.” preceding the signature could mean “fecit.” However, this would be highly unusual, since “f.” as an abbreviation for “fecit” usually follows the name. Given the Maltese context, where it is standard for knights to be called Fra (or Frater) and for the word to be abbreviated as a simple “F.” or “f.” before the cavalier’s name, Caravaggio’s signature should be deciphered as “fra Michelangelo,” and such a reading is now widely accepted. On Caravaggio’s earlier macabre conceits and the idea of criminality as a metaphor for artistic genius, see my discussion of David with the Head of Goliath of about 1606 (my preferred dating) in the Galleria
On the Oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato in Valletta, see David M. Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's Beheading in Malta," *Burrdington Magazine* 149 (November 2007): 759–66. Despite a small reduction of its width (see n. 8 below), the *Beheading*, in my view, is still in its original location. However, it has recently been suggested as *en passant* by several scholars, including Giovanni Bonello, *Rebatiżi Notti on Art and Religion Related to Malta,* in *Histories of Malta,* vol. 6, *Ventures and Adventures* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2005). 174–75, that before Mattia Preti’s remodelling of the room in 1622, he may have relied on the architecture now occupied by a large altar and the *Beheading*, surmounted by a vault with a lantern, did not exist. Instead, the hypothesis goes, this area was completely enclosed and served as a sacristy for the oratory; it would have had a flat ceiling like the rest of the structure. In this scenario, the *Beheading* was originally hung on a dividing wall (more or less flush with what is now the opening of the chapel, marked by marble-en- crusted pilasters designed by Preti) about 16 feet forward of its present location, bringing the huge painting much closer to the center of the hall. By about 1620, a lunette painting first identified by John Azzopardi and attributed by me to Bartolomeo Garagona was likely already hanging above Merit’s canvas in the oratory. The picture, the *Martyrs of the Siege of Malta* at St. Elmo in 1565 (now in the refectory of the Franciscan Convents, Rabat), was definitely there by 1650: see Azzopardi and Stone, *Above Caravaggio: The Massacre of the Innocents in Caravaggio’s Beheading* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1984). Already in the sixteenth century, the Maltese *Oratorio di Maria* were well known on the island for assisting prisoners. But to be able to share in the privileges and indulgences of S. Giovanni Decollato in Rome, the Oratorians sought a formal affiliation with the more venerable institution. To this end, on June 19, 1578, Giacomo Bosio (the official historian of the Order of St. John, based in Rome, who often acted as its agent) was delegated to seek formal recognition from the Decollati. For the documents, see Mikel Fasutini, *Id-Demmunskin fil-Belt* (Valletta: Veritas Press, 1971), 90–103, esp. 93–95. See also Edg G. Montanaro, *Storia della Ven.de Avvisi fra Confraternita del Simeo. Rosario e della Misericordia* (Valletta: Empire Press, 1942); and Sciberras, *Confraternita della Misericordia.*
11. Stone, “The Context of Caravaggio’s Beheading,” 168; and Sciberras, “Confraternita della Misericordia,” 766 and n. 44. As first discussed by Dominic Cutajar, “Caravaggio in Malta: His Works and His Influence,” in Caravaggio in Malta, ed. Philip Farrugia Gordon (Malta: Med-Med Bank, 1989), 1-18, esp. n. 15, unpublished legal documents of 1615, which pertain to Bartolomeo Garagona’s rejected painting of 1612 for the oratory representing the Crucifixion with Mary and Saint John the Baptist, establish that at a fairly early date the novices were already commissioning art for the hall for their own ceremonies. Banca Giuratale Archive (Mdina), Magna Curia Castellanea, Acta Originalia, vol. 95 (1613), fol. 167v, refer several times to the oratory as “where the novices congregate [dove si congregano li signori novizzi]”; see, for example, fol. 158r. There has been scholarly debate as to the size of Garagona’s picture. But in rereading the documents, I discovered that the three figures of this lost (and possibly partially unfinished) work were ordered to be life-size (fol. 165v): “l’immagini dovevessero in tutti modi essere della giusta statura d’un uomo per fare più bella appar- enza, e sopra tutto per eccitare più à devotione gl’asistenti” (the representations should without exception be the proper size of a man in order to make a more beautiful appearance, and above all to better inspire devotion in the spectators). The man charged with caring for the novices, Capitano d’Obedienza (Chaplain of Obedience), is named throughout the law-suit documents.

12. The first recorded investiture in the oratory occurred in December 1604 (Sciberras, “Confraternita della Misericordia,” 765). Even though the building was not yet entirely complete in the autumn of 1604, it must be concluded that an altar had by this point, since installation ceremonies require one.

13. Hannibal P. Scicluna, The Church of St. John in Valletta (Rome: Casa M. S. Patrimonju Malti, 2004), 80-94. For the relic itself, which was looted in 1610, see H. J. A. Sire, The Knights Hospitaller (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), is indispensable for understanding the traditions of the order; see esp. chap. 4.

14. For a fine survey of the history of the order with extensive bibliogra- phy, see H. J. A. Sire, The Knights of Malta (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Though it focuses almost exclusively on the medieval period, Helen Nicholson, The Knights Hospitaller (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), is indispensable for understanding the traditions of the order; see esp. chap. 4.

15. For Caravaggio’s reception into the order, see Keith Sciberras, Virgo- nius Honoured, Chivalry Disgraced, chap. 2 of Sciberras and Stone, Caravaggio, 17-40.

16. During the order’s Malta period (1530-1798), the statutes and ordi- nances detailing the various rules on becoming a knight (typically dis- cussed under the heading “De receptione” in the statute books) are explicit about the importance of the one-year novitiate in residence on the island. Yet many would-be knights attempted to avoid serving the order “in convento” (in Malta), preferring instead the comfort of home, far from the dangers of the Turks and the rigorous military life led by the Knights in Malta and Barbary. Indeed, important families often pressured the administration of the order to accept their sons and nephews as members in this unorthodox capacity. There was money to be gained by the Knights by this alternative: the “habit out- side the convento [abito fuori convento]” required a much higher passaggio than the norm. Nonetheless, despite being lucrative, mail-order knight- hoods were frowned on, since they left the order with fewer men to protect the island or serve aboard the Knights’ galleys. And increas- ingly over the course of the seventeenth century, the proper care and training of the novices from a religious standpoint became a concern. Theologians such as Fabrizio Cagliola, sculphe Di Siero and Orietta Verdi, exh. cat. (Rome: De Luca, 2011), the first notice in the archives for the nocturnal “tumulto” in Malta was August 19, 1608, the day after the event occurred. By August 27, the Venerable Council had indicted Caravaggio, and he must have been sent to prison at Fort St. Angelo almost imme- diately to await trial. Caravaggio was probably already in custody by the time of the festa of the Decollation on August 29. If the dedication cer- emony for The Beheading of Saint John took place that day, the painter would have required armed escort across the Grand Harbor to Valletta to attend it (an unlikely scenario, but possible). It must have been a somber affair for those present, even if the peintre maudit unexpectedly appeared, due to a combination of musicians’ strikes that prohibited a regular mass offering of incense for defense but which also carefully controlled entrances and exits for fear of spies and the escape of slaves). For a general discussion of Cara- vaggio’s crime in Malta, see Sciberras, “Virgoonz Honoured, Chivalry Disgraced.”

17. For example, there were fines for wearing the habit of the order be- cause it was a sign of humility, and above all to better inspire devotion in the spectators). The man charged with caring for the novices, Capitano d’Obedienza (Chaplain of Obedience), is named throughout the law-suit documents.

18. On Caravaggio’s criminality in Rome and his exodus from the Eternal City in the summer of 1606, see Helen Langdon, Caravaggio: A Life (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998). See also Caravaggio a Roma: Una vista del seno (Rome: Istituto Centrale del Restauro, 1998; Maltese translation: Rome: De Luca, 2011). The first notice in the archives for the nocturnal “tumulto” in Malta was August 19, 1608, the day after the event occurred. By August 27, the Venerable Council had indicted Caravaggio, and he must have been sent to prison at Fort St. Angelo almost imme- diately to await trial. Caravaggio was probably already in custody by the time of the festa of the Decollation on August 29. If the dedication cer- emony for The Beheading of Saint John took place that day, the painter would have required armed escort across the Grand Harbor to Valletta to attend it (an unlikely scenario, but possible). It must have been a somber affair for those present, even if the peintre maudit unexpectedly appeared, due to a combination of musicians’ strikes that prohibited a regular mass offering of incense for defense but which also carefully controlled entrances and exits for fear of spies and the escape of slaves). For a general discussion of Cara- vaggio’s crime in Malta, see Sciberras, “Virgoonz Honoured, Chivalry Disgraced.”

19. Times (Malta), April 26, 1989. See also M. J. Zerafa, Caravaggio Diaries (Malta: Grimaud, 2004), 134.


21. For the relic itself, which was looted in 1610, see H. J. A. Sire, The Knights Hospitaller (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), is indispensable for understanding the traditions of the order; see esp. chap. 4.

22. Among the many, the first recorded investiture in the oratory occurred in December 1604 (Sciberras, “Confraternita della Misericordia,” 765). Even though the building was not yet entirely complete in the autumn of 1604, it must be concluded that a proper altar had by this point, since installation ceremonies require one.

23. For the relic itself, which was looted in 1610, see H. J. A. Sire, The Knights Hospitaller (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), is indispensable for understanding the traditions of the order; see esp. chap. 4.

24. She is sometimes thought to be Salome, but her plain features, simple dress, and apron do not make this identification likely. One should not exclude the possibility, however. The iconography of Salome (or Herodias) with the head of John the Baptist in the sixteenth and seven- teenth centuries is much less stable than one might expect. Miles L. Chappell and David M. Stone, “Fabricio Bosch, ‘Pittor di Brio’: A New Hypothesis and Other Proposals,” Nuovi Studi: Rivista di Arte Antica e Moderna 16 (2011): 61-66, found this to be true even in Florence, whose patron saint is the Baptist.

25. Below I discuss the very remote possibility that the inscription on the sword in the Borghese David with the Head of Goliath is an abbreviation of Caravaggio’s name.

26. Herwarth Röttinger, It Caravaggio: Ricerche e interpretazioni (Rome: Bul- zoni, 1974), 209. For a discussion of the problem of interpretation for his reli- gious art, it would be wrong to attempt to link these traits with pre- sumed feelings of remorse over the killing of Ranuccio Tomassoni in May 1606. Personal experience certainly enriched Caravaggio’s...

30. The Knights of St. John, from the end of the thirteenth century, were not as an element of self-confession. It is not as if Caravaggio chose this theme. His other depictions of St. John the Baptist and no other subject for its altarpiece would have been appropriate. It is not as if Caravaggio wished, somehow, in The Beheading of Saint John, to make an "identification with the Baptist," though I would be more specific: with the Baptist's blood.


29. I offer here the first in-depth analysis of Caravaggio's novel signature. I do not intend to provide a broad discussion of the painting's composition, iconography, and original context—topics already addressed in the literature. As the reader will by now have observed, I have nonetheless taken this opportunity (mainly in the notes) to confront certain ongoing problems, especially those related to the early history of the oratory and the positioning of the picture within it, since these have some bearing on the interpretation of the signature. For general discussions of the painting, in addition to the relevant sources cited above, see Catherine Pughis, Caravaggio: The Man of His Time (London: Phaidon, 1998); Bert Trefers, Caravaggio nel sangue del Battista (Rome: Shakespear and Company, 2000); Maurizio Marini, Caravaggio: “pictor praestantissimus”: L‘iter artistico e cronistorico dell’arte di tutt’temps, 3rd ed. (Rome: Newton Compton, 2001); John T. Spike, Caravaggio (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991); and John Varriano, Caravaggio: The Art of Realism (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), esp. chapters 5 and 7, among many others, too numerous to note here. Sciberras and Stone, Caravaggio, contains a nearly complete bibliography of recent studies. For the earlier literature, see Mia Ciotti, Michelangelo Merisi detto il Caravaggio: Tutte le opere, reprinted from Fatti storici bergamaschi: Il seicento, vol. 1 (Bergamo: Bolis, 1985).

30. The Knights of St. John, from the end of the thirteenth century, were divided by nationality into tongues, or languages. See Nicholson, Knights Hospitaller, 73. For the San Jerone, its patron, the question of its location in the seicento (it probably was not in the Chapel of the Italian Langue at St. John's until after Malaspina's death in 1624), and the reliability of Giovan Pietro Bellori's observations regarding the work and its so-called pendant, Magdalene, see Keith Sciberras and David M. Stone, “Malaspina, Malta, and Caravaggio's St. Jerome,” Paragone, 3rd ser., 61, no. 60 (March 2005): 3–17. Though Malaspina was the prior of Naples during this period he was resident in Malta. In fact, he probably arrived in Malta on the very same galley as Caravaggio. In any case, he is documented on the island by August 15, 1607. For a copy after the San Jerone (private collection) that contains the mysterious monogram GNDF, see Roberta Lapucci, L'eredità tecnica del Caravaggio (Rome: Istituto Centrale del Restauro, 1991), 8 and n. 1. It is uncertain whether ICR took a sample for a cross section. It was worth keeping in mind, however, that the right side of the coat of arms was damaged by the thieves, providing the restorers a full view of the layers of paint that made up the four paintings at St. John's containing the Malaspina arms (all apparently from the bequest mentioned in a document of May 10, 1629; see Sciberras and Stone, “Malaspina, Malta, and Caravaggio’s St. Jerome”). Scaccia and Stone, 542, cat. no. 92, by contrast, thinks the signature was probably added only after the canvas was transported to a public place. The picture was likely kept in Malaspina's residence in Malta before its donation to St. John's. This raises the question of when arms are applied (or not) to a painting. It would indeed be unlike Caravaggio to disrupt the realism of his picture by painting a coat of arms on it. But I think the restorers are probably correct that Merisi did, in fact, execute this crest for Malaspina, who may have intended all along to donate the work to St. John's. The prior of Naples, after all, was head of the Italian Langue and would have anticipated being buried in that nation's chapel. For a detailed account of the recent restorations undertaken in the Chapel of the Italian Langue, see Sante Guido and Giuseppe Mantella, eds., Storie di restauri nella chiesa conventuale di San Giovanni Battista a Valletta: La Cappella di Santa Caterina, La Vergine e il Vangelo di San Lorenzo, ed. Peppe Mandosio Mandosi, whose dispropriamento was registered on July 5, 1629. Francesco dell'Antella served for many years in consenso as the grand master's secretary for Italian letters. Resident on the island throughout Caravaggio's sojourn, he was the patron of two paintings by Merisi, a Sleeping Cupid (Pitti Palace, Florence) and a lost Portrait of Wignacourt. A member of one of the most important playwrights and poets of the period, Michelangelo Buonarroti Jr. (the grandnephew of the sculptor), dell'Antella seems to have had a great interest in poetry, joining a prestigious literary group, the Accademia degli Antellassi, after he returned to Florence to take charge of his commenda (lands and buildings he controlled as a knight's estate) had passed to the order, creditors had virtually no claim to it. A gentleman would not put his creditors and the order into such a distasteful legal battle but would instead pave the way for a smooth settlement of properties through the device of the disponimento (a will, which needed a licenza— a license—from the grand master of Malta to be written and considered legal). One can get a clear sense of how the system worked by reading the dying words of Commendatore Mandosio Mandosi, whose disponimento was registered on July 5, 1629. Francesco dell'Antella served for many years in consenso as the grand master's secretary for Italian letters. Resident on the island throughout Caravaggio's sojourn, he was the patron of two paintings by Merisi, a Sleeping Cupid (Pitti Palace, Florence) and a lost Portrait of Wignacourt. A member of one of the most important playwrights and poets of the period, Michelangelo Buonarroti Jr. (the grandnephew of the sculptor), dell'Antella seems to have had a great interest in poetry, joining a prestigious literary group, the Accademia degli Antellassi, after he returned to Florence to take charge of his commenda (lands and buildings he controlled as a knight's estate) had passed to the order, creditors had virtually no claim to it. 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42. A fundamental source for understanding the Knights’ attitude toward nobility may be found in Anna Maria Draconis, “Il giovane Caravaggio in Lombardia: Ricerche documentarie sui Merisi, gli Aratoni e i marchesi di Caravaggio” (Hibbard, Caravaggio, 345-47). But, as Giacomo Berra, “Quarto Punto: A favore di chi acquistino i nostri fratelli privati tuttora, ò guadagno, ò guadagno.” Caravaggio, by contrast, was a professional painter. In Malta he may have donated all his pictures to avoid the taint of “guadagno” (but this matter is hardly settled).

43. The case of the social-climbing sculptor Baccio Bandinelli may have been known to Caravaggio. Bandinelli’s experience in Florence perfectly captures the kind of hostility, mutatis mutandis, I suspect the painter encountered in Valletta. As Joanna M. Williams, Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 140–41, has observed: “To ‘prove’ his nobility [for entry into the Spanish Order of Santiago], Bandinelli fabricated aristocratic ancestors as far back as Charlemagne, describing himself as a member of the noble Sienese family, and changing his original name, Brandini, to theirs.” The art milieu of the Florentine court was both competitive and hostile. Neither Bandinelli’s new signature, BACCIO BANDINELLI FLORENTINUS SANCTI IACOPI EQUIS FACIEBAT, nor his knighthood were well received by his peers, as testified to by the first line of one of the many poems written to vilify the artist’s Christ in the Duomo: “O Baccius facies habebis Bandinello...” Other lampoons give a further idea of the possible play of words surrounding his title: “Io son quel nominato Cavaliere, / Baccio scalpellatore de’ Bandinelli...” (I am one nominated Knight, Baccio de’ Bandinelli, merely a wall-cutting butcher, albeit a geniù in due hone: / non ti crepa el cuore / Veder un scar- pellin comendatore? / He was created a gentleman in two hours. Doesn’t it make your heart croak to see a stonemason as a com- mander?). Words of resentment regarding Caravaggio’s title have not yet been discovered. But I suspect it was not a coincidence that his only infraction in Malta occurred just days after he became a knight. Was the tumult in August caused by an insult that pushed Caravaggio to defend his honor?

44. Painters of talent in late-sixteenth-century Malta were few and far between, and they were thus greatly prized. But these artists were certainly not on any kind of fast track to become knights, and none achieved Merisi’s later success in being made a brother so quickly. Merisi’s situation should be contrasted with the vicissitudes of his immediate predecessor on the island, the Florentine frescoist and altarpiece painter Filippo Paladini. Having committed a serious crime in Florence and Palermo in 1593, Paladini was sentenced in 1597 to row on the grand duke’s galley. Before 1589, he was transferred to the Knights, still as a forzato (prisoner condemned to hard labor). Abroad in Malta, he was recognized as a gifted painter and released to fulfill commissions as a master of the grand master’s palace in Valletta and at Palazzo Verdala in the countryside. In early 1595, he had achieved such esteem that Grand Master Verdala, on his deathbed, liberated him. Verdala’s successor, Marino Garzes, made Paladini an official member of the Knights’ household. A few months later, Garzes approved Paladini’s petition to leave the island and return to Florence. Even though Verdala was notorious for giving out habit of grazia maggiore (habits of magical grace)—so much so that, as discussed below, these honorary titles were later never bestowed on Caravaggio. By contrast, was given the habit in one year. (Provost, mentioned above, received membership only after serving the order for eighteen long years.) There must have been heavy political pressure applied to Wignacourt to confer such an extraordinary honor on the Lombard painter. For an example of the kind of unrelenting diplomatic force that could be brought to bear on the long-suffering French grand master (and his skillful resistance to it, at least in one extraordinary case several years after Caravaggio’s defrocking), see Stone, “Bad Habit; Cigoli’s Knighthood.” For Provost, see Giovanni Bonello, “The Sculptor Simon Provost in Malta: New Attributes,” 26–34, and “Simon Provost: A Sequel,” 35–40, in Art in Malta: Discoveries and Recoveries (Malta: Fondazione Patronaggi Maltesi, 1999). On Paladini in Valletta, see Sciberras and Stone, “Saints and Heroes: Frescos by Filippo Paladini and Leonardo Spada,” in Palazzi and Grandes Valletta, ed. Albert Garonna (Malta: Fondazione Patronaggi Maltesi, 2001), 139–57.

45. For an overview of how the reception rules varied by language, see Sire, Knights of Malta. For a specialized study dealing with nobility and reception into the order, based on an unpublished manuscript of the Grand Master’s tumulto in August caused by an insult that pushed Caravaggio to defend his honor;

46. Other than the usual debts to the Religione—some no doubt of a certain value. Anything not detailed in the latter, based on extensive documentary research, was not noticeable. In the grand master’s palace in Valletta and at Palazzo Verdala in the countryside. Before 1589, he was transferred to the Knights, still as a forzato (prisoner condemned to hard labor). Abroad in Malta, he was recognized as a gifted painter and released to fulfill commissions as a master of the grand master’s palace in Valletta and at Palazzo Verdala in the countryside. In early 1595, he had achieved such esteem that Grand Master Verdala, on his deathbed, liberated him. Verdala’s successor, Marino Garzes, made Paladini an official member of the Knights’ household. A few months later, Garzes approved Paladini’s petition to leave the island and return to Florence. Even though Verdala was notorious for giving out habit of grazia maggiore (habits of magical grace)—so much so that, as discussed below, these honorary titles were later never bestowed on Caravaggio. By contrast, was given the habit in one year. (Provost, mentioned above, received membership only after serving the order for eighteen long years.) There must have been heavy political pressure applied to Wignacourt to confer such an extraordinary honor on the Lombard painter. For an example of the kind of unrelenting diplomatic force that could be brought to bear on the long-suffering French grand master (and his skillful resistance to it, at least in one extraordinary case several years after Caravaggio’s defrocking), see Stone, “Bad Habit; Cigoli’s Knighthood.” For Provost, see Giovanni Bonello, “The Sculptor Simon Provost in Malta: New Attributes,” 26–34, and “Simon Provost: A Sequel,” 35–40, in Art in Malta: Discoveries and Recoveries (Malta: Fondazione Patronaggi Maltesi, 1999). On Paladini in Valletta, see Sciberras and Stone, “Saints and Heroes: Frescos by Filippo Paladini and Leonardo Spada,” in Palazzi and Grandes Valletta, ed. Albert Garonna (Malta: Fondazione Patronaggi Maltesi, 2001), 139–57.

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46. On family trees in the Renaissance, see Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “The Genesis of the Family Tree,” *I Tatti Studies* 4 (1991): 105–29. For some exceptionally beautiful examples submitted with the *prove*, including that of Antonio Maurizio Solari (Fig. 13), see Tomasini Riccardo di Norto and Luitpold Gentile, eds., *Un nuovo calendario*. 

47. The Knights were unusually clear about what constituted nobility. The some of the statute books contain a printed questionnaire that was to be used as a model by the procuratori investigating the noble lineage of applicants. 


49. The archival record, as I know it, suggests that in the early seicento, the brotherhood; see John T. Spike, “Matteo Preti’s Presence at Malta,” *Burlington Magazine* (August 1973), 501. On an individual level of patronage there is no question that knights such as Grand Master Wignacourt and Fra Francesco dell’Anella were interested in Caravaggio. But even they did not fully exploit his presence on the island. Indeed, it is striking how few pictures Caravaggio made during his fifteen-month sojourn (though perhaps several pictures have been lost from the historical record). With few exceptions, such as the presence in Malta of Leopoldo Spada in 1610, the period between Caravaggio’s escape from the island and the arrival of Preti is something of a drought artistically. 

50. For the Wignacourt portrait, see Stone, “Apelles of Malta.”

51. The Knights were at pains to stress the primacy of the *prove* raising their status, and this was no doubt the tradition Caravaggio was versed in. (Of course, there were polemics over what constituted “virtue,” but this question cannot be addressed here.) The flavor of the blood-versus-virtue argument is nicely exemplified by the Franco-Flemish theologian and humanist Josse Chlickove (1472–1485) in his *De vera nobilitate* (Paris, 1512): “Likewise, noble and ancient families often come to an end, when their last living descendants either die without offspring or are publicly disgraced and stripped of their noble title by extraneous circumstances. There is nothing extraordinary in this. Since nobility of birth is a fortuitous and external good, it is like all the other goods of that sort, subject to change and instability. Nobility based on virtue, on the other hand, even if it has been acquired by a man’s own efforts and lacks the support of noble ancestry, knows not the death nor decay and confers on him immortal glory and undying fame. Since such nobility is related to virtue and very close to it in nature, it remains glorious forever. Nor can the man who possesses nobility based on virtue be reduced to any kind of dishonour. Virtue removes him from all possibility of shame and disgrace and renders him famous and celebrated in the highest heavens.” As translated by Alison Holcroft, “Josse Chlickove,” in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, vol. 5, *Political Philosophy*, ed. Jill Kray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249. See also Albert Rabl Jr., trans. and ed., *Knowledge, Goodness, and Power: The Debate over Nobility among Quinto- Trento Intellectuals* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Renaissance Society of America, 1991). Theories such as Chlickove’s would have been considered heretical by the Order of St. John.


54. As I discuss below, Caravaggio highlights his magical powers to turn paint into blood to achieve several different but compatible meanings. His thematizing of his own processes should be compared with those of the double murderer Benvincenzo Cencelli in visiting the Perugia, for which see Michael Cole, “Celim’s Blood,” in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, vol. 5, *Political Philosophy*, ed. Jill Kray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249. See also Albert Rabl Jr., trans. and ed., *Knowledge, Goodness, and Power: The Debate over Nobility among Quinto- Trento Intellectuals* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Renaissance Society of America, 1991). Theories such as Chlickove’s would have been considered heretical by the Order of St. John.

55. The image of the knight is based on Pinturicchio’s 1504 fresco in the Chapel of St. John the Baptist in the Duomo at Siena.

56. For the comparison to Saint Peter Martyr was first introduced by Calvesi, *Storia del Caravaggio* (Milan: Electa, 2000), 75–77.

57. The image of the knight is based on Pinturicchio’s 1504 fresco in the Chapel of St. John the Baptist in the Duomo at Siena.

58. As I discuss below, Caravaggio highlights his magical powers to turn paint into blood to achieve several different but compatible meanings. His thematizing of his own processes should be compared with those of the double murderer Benvincenzo Cencelli in visiting the Perugia, for which see Michael Cole, “Celim’s Blood,” in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, vol. 5, *Political Philosophy*, ed. Jill Kray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249. See also Albert Rabl Jr., trans. and ed., *Knowledge, Goodness, and Power: The Debate over Nobility among Quinto- Trento Intellectuals* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Renaissance Society of America, 1991). Theories such as Chlickove’s would have been considered heretical by the Order of St. John.


60. One of the earliest stories to feature a pact with the Devil signed in blood is that of Saint Theophilus of Adana (d. 538). Philip Palmer and Robert More, *The Sorcerer’s Faust Tradition*, from *Simon Magnus to Lessing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936).

61. The caravans (or caravans) are the expeditions abroad the galleys required of all knights aspiring to the rank of Knight of Justice. Each caravans was about six months long; in some periods five such stints were necessary before this title could be conferred. For a fascinating diary of a French knight aboard the caravans in the seventeenth century, see *Mémoires et caravanes de J. B. de Luppé du Carrard*, ed. le comte de Luppé (Paris: Auguste Aubry, 1865).


63. See Patricia A. Emison, *Creating the “Divine” Artist, from Dante to Michelangelo* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). A rapid ascent, though, could provoke jealousy and ridicule, as the example of Bandinelli attests (see n. 43 above).

64. One of the earliest stories to feature a pact with the Devil signed in blood is that of Saint Theophilus of Adana (d. 538). Philip Palmer and Robert More, *The Sorcerer’s Faust Tradition*, from *Simon Magnus to Lessing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936).


66. John’s blood was sacred—and not just to the Order of St. John. In Naples, where Caravaggio resided prior to his Maltese sojourn, there was a relic of the precious blood of the Baptist at St. Ligouri that liquefied annually (“come vivo rubino, nella sua ampolla brillare, e bollire”) on the feast of the Decollation, August 29. Bartolomeo dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione, parte prima* (Verona: Giovanni Berno, 1703), 273–76, notes that on August 1, 1586, after petitions by S. Ligouri’s abbe, the grand master and Sovereign Council in Malta decreed that all members of the order present in Naples during the annual feast should beforthence to attend the eucharistic mass dressed in rapiere “manti di panta” (their formal habits).

67. For the print and the various painted versions (in which the ocean is blood red), see the entry by Gaia Bindl (cat. no. 9), in *Pittura barocca...*
“Caravaggio’s Sleeping Cupid,” I discuss the possibility that del’Antella may have further spurred Caravaggio’s rivalry with the famous sculptor and fostered the idea of Merisi as “Michelangelo moderno.” Whereas another seicento artist, to emulate him by signing but one work in his career, only Caravaggio (as I am sure he relished) could do so with the exact same name. He may have felt his name was a sign that he had been destined for fame. Though many of Caravaggio’s brethren in May 1605 might have been unable to decode the Lombard painter’s sophisticated conceits and allusions in The Beheading of Saint John and the Sleeping Cupid, del’Antella and his wide circle of Florentine friends would have beheld nothing but an incredible audacity.

This group included a grandnephew of Michelangelo, the amateur architect Fra Francesco Buonarroti (brother of the famous poet Michelangelo Jr.), who brought some of his uncle’s drawings and a copy of the Vocabolario della Crusca to the island. And I suspect that Caravaggio, who lived and worked on the island without interruption for fifteen months, occasionally held forth on his paintings and theories. For del’Antella’s interest in poetry, see n. 32 above.

In Carlo Crivelli’s witty Madonna and Child of about 1480 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), caravaggio is affixed with fictive little wax “droplets,” one of which has already fallen off.


For a recent discussion of Caravaggio’s self-portraits, see Helen Langdon, “Caravaggio: Biography in Paint,” in de Giorgio and Sciberras, Caravaggio and Painters of Realism, 53-64. For a stimulating interpretation of the lantern in the Betrayal of Christ, see Irving Lavin, “Caravaggio Revolutionary or the Impossibility of Seeing.” In Opera e gnomi: Studi sui mille anni di arte eretica ed eretici, ed. Klaus Bergdolt and Giorgio Bonanti (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), 625-44.


Caravaggio’s gesture was risky. Writing graffiti on an altarpiece would have been considered sacrilege. The placement (so large, so central) and form (so rough, common, and bloody) of his inscription were surely meant to provoke. These effects, and the very idea of their risky nature, contribute significantly to the novitio and sense of meraviglia he has conjured in this work. Caravaggio toys with the spectator. He challenges us to decide whether to read the picture as a conceit involving a bystander in biblical times who quickly inscribed his name in John’s fresh blood on the prison floor—after the blow with the sword but before the head was separated with the knife (unquestionably the priory reading and consistent, as I have said, with Caravaggio’s earlier essays on the theme of the artist as witness) or as a simple act of vandalism on the altarpiece itself, which takes place in the present. The fact that the blood seems partly in scorcio and partly on the surface of the canvas creates the conclusion. The painter’s name is counted on us first to suspect present-day graffiti, reject it as outrageous, look more closely for an alternative, and then discover the conceit of the eyewitness at the scene of the crime. However, in Caravaggio’s case, coming to too firm a conclusion regarding Caravaggio’s intent here to signify actual graffiti—and the degree to which this act is meant to be transgressive—to learn more about seicento attitudes toward such popular writing in public venues (apart from pasquinades, cartelli infamanti, and so on, which are well known). For a general look at popular writing, see Armando Petrucci, Scritture e popolo nella Roma barocca, 1635-1721, exh. cat. (Rome: Quasar, 1982). Laurie Nusseinder, The Politics of Space in Early Modern Rome,” Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome 42 (1997): 161-86, esp. 163, gives some context for thinking about the spaces of writing. Though not on Italy, see the exemplary study by Juliet Fleming, Caravaggio and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England (London: Reaktion Books, 2001). For a different interpretation of the signature, see the engaging book by Michael Fried, The Moment of Caravaggio (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 218-20, who states that the blood “repels out the artist’s name” and that “the blood describes his signature,” terms that suggest a different (and more positive) conceit than the very physical and personal idea of graffiti. I am claiming for Caravaggio’s aggressive gesture.


85. Ibid., 201 and n. 53. See also Mirollo, Poet of the Marvelous, 46–51; and Giambattista Marino, La galeria, ed. Marzio Pieri, 2 vols. (Padua: Livi-an, 1979), esp. vol. 1, xxx–xlv (citations below are from this latter text, which is based on the second edition of La galeria [Venice: Giotti, 1619], which incorporated Marino’s corrections to the faulty first edition). See also Carlo Caruso, “La Galeria: Questioni e proposte esegi- che,” in Marino e il Barocco, da Napoli a Parigi: Atti del convegno di Basilea, 7–9 giugno 2007, ed. Emilio Rusno (Alessandria: Edizioni del’Orso, 2009), 185–207.


88. Implying a variety of meanings, artist signatures on weapons have a long history; the subject deserves a thorough study. Examples include Fra Filippo Lippi’s signature on an ax in the Adoration of the Child Child in a Forest, now in the Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (see Robin, “Signposts of Invention,” 574); Perugino’s on the (very paintbrush-like) arrow piercing the neck of Saint Sebastian in a half-length picture of the saint in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Peters- burg; and Bronzino’s on the sword held by Judith in the Christ in Limbo altarpiece (Museo di S. Croce, Florence). Correggio inscribed his name on the torture wheel below Saint Catherine in his Madonna of Saint Francis altar in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, for which see Giancarla Perini, “From Allegri to Laeta-Lieto: The Shaping of Correggio’s Artis- tic Distinctiveness,” Art Bulletin 86, no. 3 (September 2004): 459–76, with bibliography on signatures.

89. Marini, Caravaggio, 568. More legible lettering in a copy of the work in the Staatliche Museen, Kassel, 50% by 38 in. (129 by 96.5 cm), from the first half of the seventeenth century, seems to confirm this Augustinian reading. See Jürgen Harten and Jean-Hubert Martin, eds., Caravaggio: Originale und Kopien im Spiegel der Forschung, exh. cat. (Osstil- der: Haie Cantz Verlag, 2006), 187, cat. no. 3. In my opinion, the copy’s style only reinforces the argument that the Borrhese picture predates the Naples period.

90. See Keith Christiansen, entry to cat. no. 20, in Orazio and Artemisia Gen-

91. David’s sword, I believe, can be interpreted this way, side by side with the Augustinian inscription. David’s humility (the sword) slays pride (Goliath/Caravaggio). But David, as mentioned below, also represents the artist (without self-portraiture). David’s sword, therefore, is closely associated with Caravaggio himself (and his paintbrush), just as Michelangelo, in his famous poem, associated his drill (“l’arco”) with his marble David’s slingshot: “Davide chella fromba / et io chollarco / angelo, in his famous poem, associated his drill (“l’arco”) with his marble David’s slingshot: “Davide chella fromba / et io chollarco / Michelagniolo” (David with his sling / and I with my bow / Michelangelo). See Stone, “Self and Myth.”

92. Marino’s use of the metaphor in his Massacre of the Innocents (bk. 5) is discussed in Cropper, “Petrifying Art,” 207.


94. Marino, La galeria, ed. Pieri, vol. 1, 17 (“Piramo e Tise del Fulminetto,” poem 15 in “Favole”), The translations here and below are mine in collabor- ation with Victoria Kirkham, whom I thank for her generous assistance.

95. Ibid., vol. 1, 83 (“Cesare,” poem 16 in “Ritratti uomini”). This poem is briefly mentioned in Caruso, “La Galeria: Questioni e proposte,” 203.

96. See, for example, Don Pio Rossi Piacentino, Convito morale. . . . (Venice: Guerigli, 1639), 303: “E cosa troppo strana il veder Principi sovrani passare per le mani di un Boia. . . . & egli medesimo n’hebbe tanto horrore, che fece tagliar la testa al Carnefice, c’haveva fatta l’esecu- zione” (It is something too strange, to see sovereign princes pass under the hands of the executioner. . . . and he himself had felt such horror, that he had the head of the executioner who had performed the exe- cution cut off).

97. On the concept of authorial guilt, see Dennis Kezar, Guilty Creatures: Renaissance Poetry and the Ethics of Authorship (New York: Oxford Univer- sity Press, 2001), esp. 3–16, with previous bibliography. He references the following remarkable passage from Sigurd Burckhardt, Shakespearean Meanings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 15: “A trage- dy—to define it very simply—is a killing poem; it is designed toward the end of bringing a man to some sort of destruction. And the killer is, quite literally, the poet; it is he, and no one else, who devises the deadly plot; it is he, therefore, who must in some sense accept responsi- bility for it.” Thomas Puttonkern, “Caravaggio’s ‘Story of St Matthew’: A Challenge to the Conventions of Painting.” Art History 21, no. 2 (June 1998): 165–81, unconvincingly argues that the man with Carava- cchio’s features at left is literally the murderer of Matthew and that the violent, seminude young man with the bandana holding Matthew’s arm, the person traditionally seen as the assassin, is instead a member of the saint’s cult who (after finding Caravaggio’s sword) is shocked at discovering Matthew in his final moments. On the contrary, I believe Caravaggio, through his self-portrait in the Martyrdom, is using a meta- phor of authorial guilt (among other conceits of authorship) and is certainly not being literal. Incidentally, it is traditional in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings for executioners to have their hair tied up in a bandana. (I imagine this is based on real-life practice, to keep one’s hair from blocking vision at the crucial moment.) And nu- dity, to which Puttonken objects, is also not uncommon for execution- ers (see, for example, Bronzino’s Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence fresco). Claude Vignon’s 1617 Martyrdom of Saint Matthew (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Arras), an unabashed homage to Caravaggio’s picture, makes it patently clear that the youth with the bandana in Merisi’s painting, as far as the French artist is concerned, is the executioner.