Signature Killer: Caravaggio and the Poetics of Blood

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"Murder can be an art, too."—*Rope,* directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1948[1]

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."[2]

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.[3]

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 R-a-c-h-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.

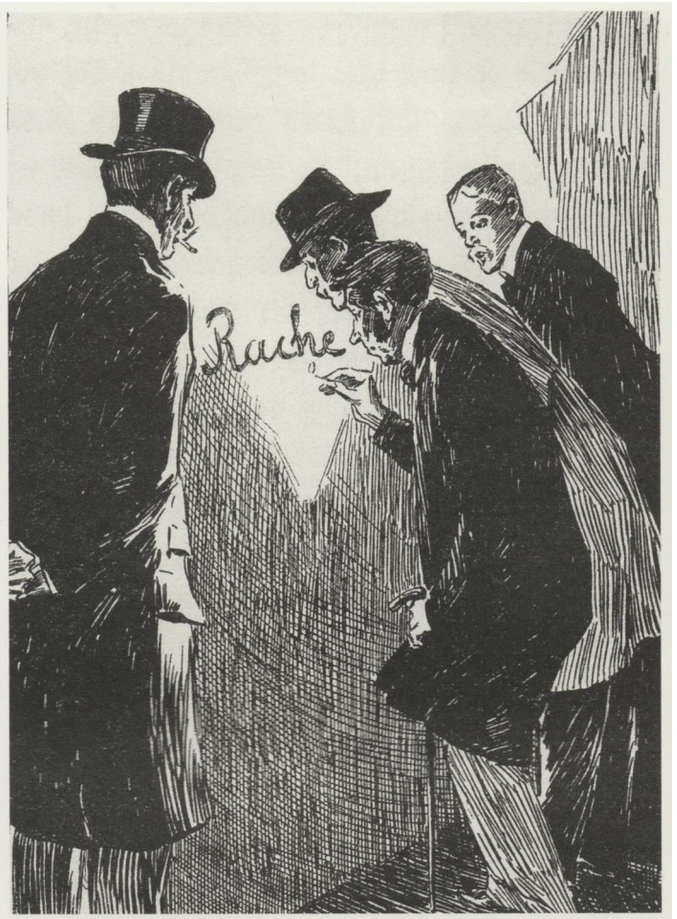
In later novels and films (and in some sensational real-life cases), maniac killers use the victim's blood to sign their deadly "masterpieces."[4] In the summer of 1946, University of Chicago student William Heirens, the notorious Lipstick Killer, terrorized the Windy City with a string of horrible murders. He taunted police by writing notes to them on his crime-scene walls using the blood-red lipstick of his victims.[5] 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

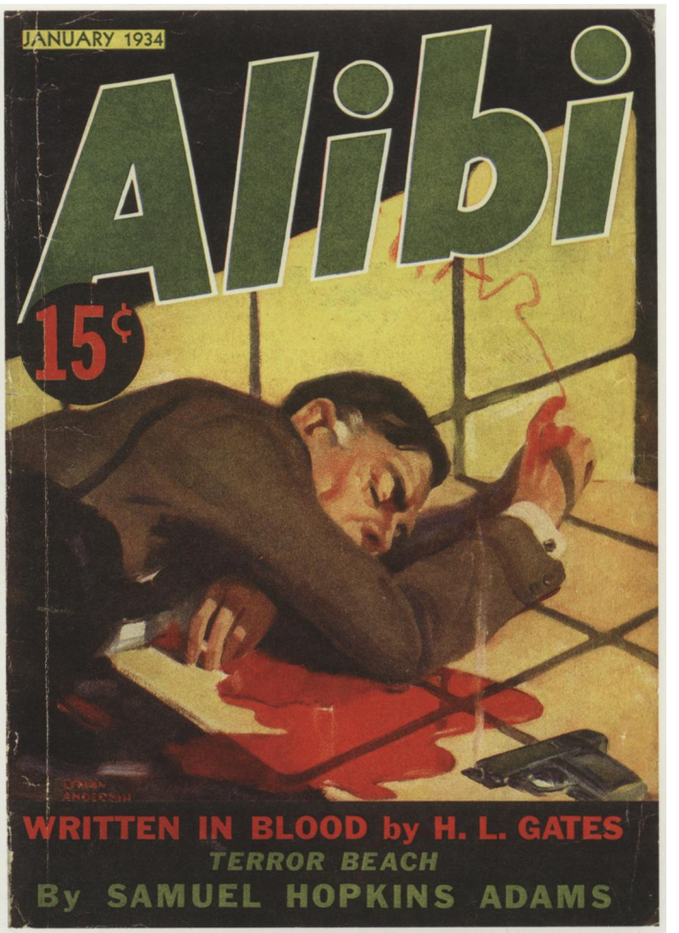
No stranger to fusing the diabolical and the creative as a metaphor of artistic genius, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio invented one of the most brilliant conceits in seicento art when he signed his name "f.[ra] MichelAng[elo]" (brother Michelangelo), in the "blood" oozing from the Baptist's severed neck in his picture for the Catholic military order of the Knights of Malta, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (Fig. 3).[6] 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).[7] 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.[8]

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.[9] 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.[10] 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.[11] The oratory also hosted meetings, investitures, and defrockings (including Caravaggio's).[12] 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.[13] 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.[14]

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.[15] 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.[16] His signature almost certainly dates to a moment immediately after his investiture, since it was



1 Richard Gutschmidt, detail of an illustration from Arthur Conan Doyle, *Späte Rache,* Stuttgart: Robert Lutz Verlag, 1902, p. 55 (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Leslie S. Klinger)



2 Lyman Anderson, cover of *Alibi* 1, no. 1 (January 1934), 9⅞ × 6⅞ in. (25 × 17.5 cm). (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by The Ray and Pat Browne Library for Popular Culture Studies, Bowling Green State University)

unthinkable, in this most hierarchical of institutions, for a novice to declare his membership before having received the habit.[17] 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.[18] Much of the bottom of the painting, including the area of the signature, was severely damaged on April 25, 1989, during an attempted theft.[19] The canvas was restored in Florence between 1997 and 1999.[20] 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.[21] 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.[22] Already by 1616, the signature had been noted by a French visitor to Malta.[23]

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.[24] 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.[25] In Herwarth Röttgen's

3 Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist,* ca. 1608, oil on canvas, 11 ft. 9¾ in. × 17 ft. ¾ in. (3.6 × 5.2 m), after its 1997–99 restoration. Oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato, Co-Cathedral of St. John, Valletta, Malta (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Scala / Art Resource, NY)

4 Oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato, Co-Cathedral of St. John, Valletta (photograph © The St. John's Co-Cathedral Foundation and Midsea Books)

5 Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist,* detail showing damage from the 1989 attempted theft (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the author)

words: "One can say that the self-portrait as St. Francis [Museo Civico, Cremona], as much as the [signature in the] *Beheading of the Baptist*—as thoughts of remorse and death—find their roots in a grave conflict between ego and super-ego, which in these years tormented the mind of the artist."[26]

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

6 Caravaggio, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist,* detail showing the restored canvas (photograph © The St. John's Co-Cathedral Foundation and Midsea Books)

7 Caravaggio, *Saint Jerome Writing,* ca. 1607, oil on canvas, 46 × 61¾ in. (117 × 157 cm). Museum of St. John's, Valletta (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Scala / Art Resource, NY)

8 Caravaggio, *Saint Jerome Writing,* detail showing the coat of arms of Fra Ippolito Malaspina (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 *Religione*'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.

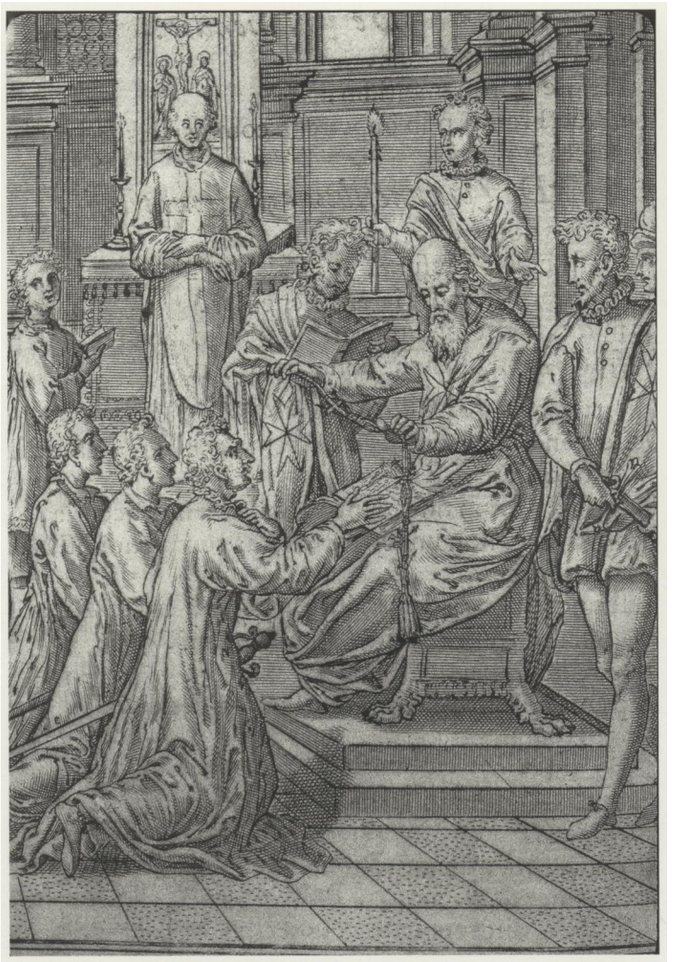
When knights were installed, as represented in Philippe Thomassin's engraving in the *Statuta Hospitalis Hierusalem* (1586–88), they took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience (Fig. 11).[34] Like monks, they were not allowed to leave proper wills: only one-fifth of their belongings, the *quinto* or *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.[37] It should be noted that the grand masters prohibited their personal coats of arms from ever being removed from the projects they constructed.[38]

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.[39] His arrogant behavior got him into serious trouble with the law, since nonnobles were prohibited from carrying arms in Rome without a special license.[40] 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).[41] 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.[42] 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.[43] 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.[44]

9 Justus Sustermans, *Portrait of Fra Francesco dell'Antella,* ca. 1620–22, oil on canvas, 22⅞ × 17 in. (58 × 43 cm). Alberto Bruschi Collection, Grassina (near Florence) (artwork in the public domain; photograph © Alberto Bruschi)

10 Floor with inlaid marble tombs, late 17th–early 18th century, Co-Cathedral of St. John, Valletta (photograph © The St. John's Co-Cathedral Foundation and Midsea Books)



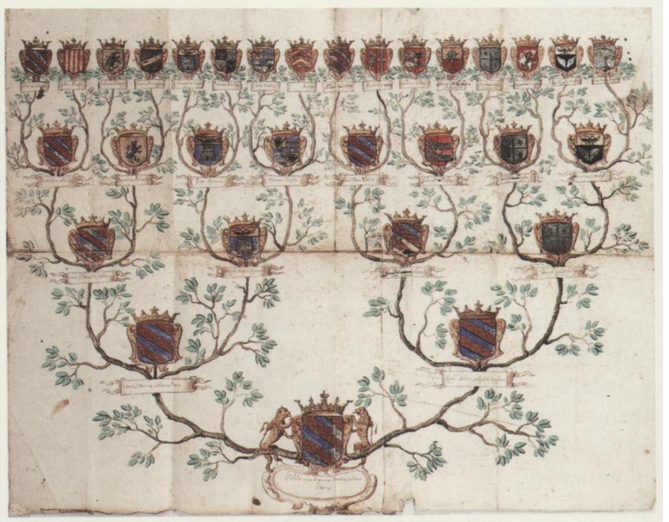
11 Philippe Thomassin, "*Induimini Novum Hominem,*" illustration for "De Receptione Fratrum," detail, from *Statuta Hospitalis Hierusalem,* Rome, 1588, p. 4, engraving after unknown designer, plate 7¼ × 5⅝ in. (18.3 × 14.2 cm). Rare Books and Special Collections, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the author)

12 Attributed to Albert Clouwet, *Portrait of Caravaggio,* from Giovan Pietro Bellori, *Vite de' pittori,* Rome, 1672, engraving (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the author)

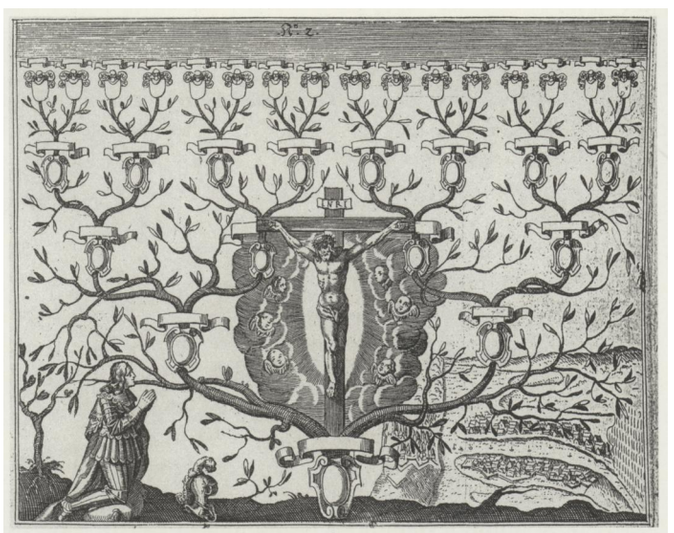
To become a full-fledged knight, called a Knight of Justice or *Cavaliere di Giustizia,* required proving noble ancestry as far back as sixteen quarters (four generations), depending on the langue.[45] As mandated by statute, the applicant had to submit a family tree with coats of arms as part of his *prove di nobiltà,* or proofs of nobility (Fig. 13).[46] 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.[47] Baptismal records were copied out; witnesses were interviewed.[48]

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.[49] 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.[50] 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.[51] 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 Michel-Angelo" 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.[52]

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.[53] 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.[54] 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.[55] Anticipating the skeptical knight who would scan *The Beheading of Saint John* for the donor's coat of arms or otherwise



13 Family tree submitted with proofs of nobility for Antonio Maurizio Solaro, ca. 1680–89, watercolor, ink, with gold leaf, 23¼ × 30¾ in. (59 × 78 cm). Archivio di Stato, Turin, Archivio Alfieri, mz. 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, 4⅞ × 6¼ 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)

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.[56] 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.[57] 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 ("credo in unum deum") in his own blood (Fig. 15).[58] Caravaggio writes

16 François Spierre, after Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Sanguis Christi,* frontispiece to F. Marchese, *Unica speranza del peccatore,* Rome, 1670, engraving, 16½ × 10¾ in. (41.9 × 27.3 cm). The British Museum, London (artwork in the public domain; photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum)

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!"[63] 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:

17 Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and Child* ("*Madonna of the Pear*"), ca. 1485, oil on panel, 33⅛ × 25¾ in. (84.3 × 65.5 cm). Pinacoteca dell'Accademia Carrara, Bergamo (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Alfredo Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY)

18 Titian, *Saint Sebastian,* lower right wing of the Averoldi Polyptych, 1522, oil on canvas, 70½ × 25⅝ in. (179 × 65 cm). SS. Nazzaro e Celso, Brescia (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Scala / Art Resource, NY)

> 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.[68]

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).[69] 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.[70] 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.[71] Signing his name in the blood of the Baptist suggests that through membership in the Order of St. John, Caravaggio himself is being reborn—rebaptized 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 ideas of faith and renewal that Caravaggio represents here are, to my mind, circumscribed by his competitive spirit and political maneuvering. 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.[72] 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 *tumulto* (brawl) in Valletta in which a senior knight was gravely wounded.[73]

Caravaggio fuit hic

Clever signatures are rare in early seventeenth-century painting.[74] In fact, most artists did not bother to sign their works at all. We are expected to know an artist's identity through his

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 in 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 picture 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 MichelAngelo."

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.

Knightly 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 pictura 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

19 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).[86] Marino 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 Marino 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, Marino 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 Marino daringly piles one metaphor on another, Caravaggio's conceits are compact; they barely disturb the realist fabric of his canvases. Marino'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

As Hibbard and others have noted, the series of displacements, contradictions, and inversions in Caravaggio's Borghese *David with the Head of Goliath,* which arguably dates to 1606, is worthy of Marino himself (Fig. 20).[87] 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).[88] 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).[89]

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).[90] Orazio's work is signed on the sword, HOR.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.[91]

The metaphor of swords for brushes is a standard one in

20 Caravaggio, *David with the Head of Goliath,* ca. 1606, oil on canvas, 49¼ × 39¾ in. (125 × 101 cm). Galleria Borghese, Rome (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Alinari / Art Resource, NY)

21 Orazio Gentileschi, *Executioner with the Head of Saint John the Baptist,* 1612–13, oil on panel transferred to canvas, 32¼ × 24 in. (82 × 61 cm). Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid)

Marino's poetry.[92] It is used in a poem from *La galeria* in which he describes a painting by Fulminetto (Martin Fréminet) of the suicides of Pyramus and Thisbe, the star-crossed lovers who inspired the story of *Romeo and Juliet.*[93] 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.)[94]

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,* Fréminet'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.

22 Caravaggio, *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew,* 1599, oil on canvas, 10 ft. 7⅛ in. × 11 ft. 3 in. (3.23 × 3.43 m). Contarelli Chapel, S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Scala / Art Resource, NY)

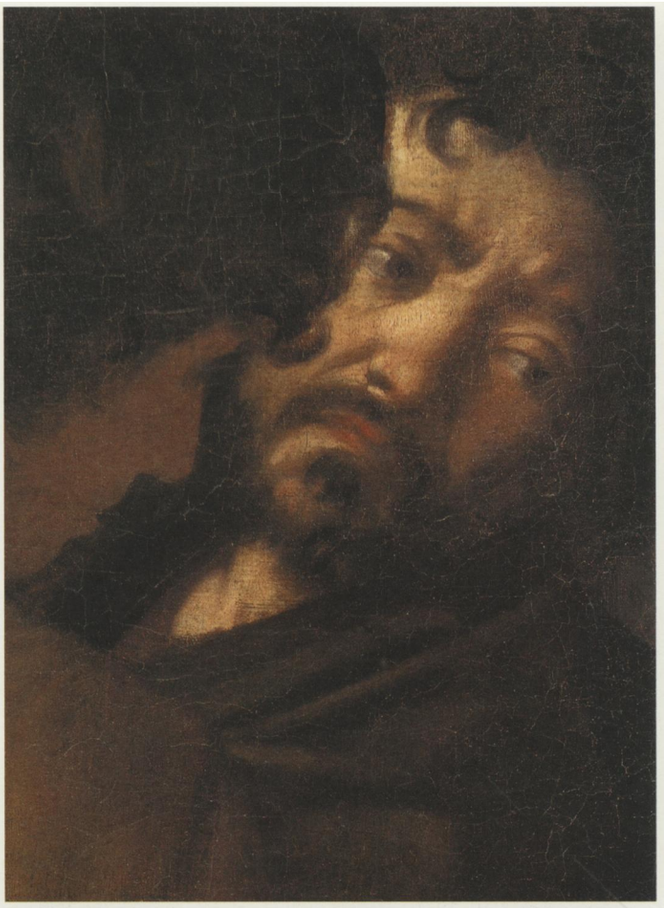
Another poem in the *Galeria,* this one dedicated to a *Portrait of Julius Caesar,* is a showpiece of verbal pyrotechnics and chiastic somersaults. Where Caravaggio plays between painting and writing in *The Beheading of Saint John* (sword and brush in the *David*), Marino here takes on the pen and the 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 tinse.
> La penna mossa da guerriera mano
> Morte omicida immortalmente estinse.
> Sì 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 immortally extinguished Murderous death. Thus with double honor, between studies and skirmishes the pen fought, the sword wrote.)[95]

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

The violent metaphors in "Pyramus and Thisbe" and "Julius Caesar" parallel many of the conceits we have observed in Caravaggio's bloody signature. Marino's poetry, as demonstrated further below, also focuses our attention on perhaps the most important and shocking of the inscription's potential claims: that Caravaggio not only executed John the Baptist 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.[96]

This was not Caravaggio's first offense. Through his famous self-portrait in the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* in the Contarelli Chapel, Rome (Figs. 22, 23), Caravaggio assumes authorial 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 expressed 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.[97]



23 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 *Galeria,* 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 dài?
> . . . . . .
>
> (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?)[98]

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 pardon, 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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Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

1. *Rope,* directed by Alfred Hitchcock, screenplay by Arthur Laurents (Transatlantic Pictures, 1948), quoted in Peter Conrad, *The Hitchcock Murders* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2000), 67.
2. Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (London, 1887), in Doyle, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes,* ed. Leslie S. Klinger, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), vol. 3, 47–64.
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.
4. Robert Keppel, *Signature Killers* (New York: Pocket, 2007).
5. A famous police photo shows Heirens's pathetic plea written with his victim's lipstick on the bedroom wall: "For heAvens sAke cAtch me BeFore I kill more I cANnot control myselF."
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 *cavaliere*'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

Borghese, Rome, in David M. Stone, "Self and Myth in Caravaggio's *David and Goliath*," in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. Genevieve Warwick (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 36–46, with previous bibliography. This is a revised version of idem, "*In Figura Diaboli:* Self and Myth in Caravaggio's *David and Goliath*," in *From Rome to Eternity: Catholicism and the Arts in Italy, ca. 1550–1650*, ed. Pamela M. Jones and Thomas Worcester (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 19–42.

7. On the Oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato in Valletta, see David M. Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading of St. John* in Malta," *Burlington Magazine* 139 (March 1997): 161–70; and idem, " 'Fra Michelangelo' and the Art of Knighthood," chap. 3 of *Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta*, by Keith Sciberras and David M. Stone (Malta: Midsea Books for the History of Art Programme, University of Malta, 2006), 67–105. For the earliest patrons of the oratory, see Keith Sciberras, "Caravaggio, the Confraternita della Misericordia and the Original Context of the Oratory of the Decollato in Valletta," *Burlington 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 *en passant* by several scholars, including Giovanni Bonello, "Random Notes on Artists Related to Malta," in *Histories of Malta*, vol. 6, *Ventures and Adventures* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2005), 174–75, that before Mattia Preti's remodeling of the oratory in the 1680s, the chapellike area 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-encrusted pilasters designed by Preti), and thus 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 Merisi's canvas in the oratory. The picture, the *Martyrs of the Siege of Malta at Fort St. Elmo in 1565* (now in the refectory of the Franciscan Conventuals, Rabat), was definitely there by 1650: see Azzopardi and Stone, "Above Caravaggio: *The Massacre of the Knights at Fort St Elmo*," *Treasures of Malta* 3, no. 1 (December 1996): 61–66; and Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading*," 166, fig. 13. The combination of the *Beheading* and the lunette—if hung forward of the present-day chapel area—would no doubt have induced claustrophobia. I think such a scheme unlikely. The architectural and visual evidence, particularly the articulation of the unrenovated back wall by simple pilasters that seem to have dictated the *Beheading*'s original dimensions (ibid., fig. 11), suggests that the altarpiece was always at the extreme end of the hall. The reduction of the width of Caravaggio's picture may have occurred when it was inserted in its Alof de Wignacourt–era frame. The framing operation could have transpired at any point after the picture was finished and before the death of the grand master in 1622, though I would imagine such an elaborate frame was not immediately ready when the canvas was delivered to the oratory in the late summer of 1608. It was previously thought that the frame, which carries Alof's coat of arms, was commissioned under his nephew, Adrien de Wignacourt (b. 1618), grand master from 1690 to 1697. But the style of the frame (as Keith Sciberras has suggested to the author) argues against this late dating. Perhaps the craftsman who produced the frame made an error in measurement, and the canvas had to be cut down. If the picture and its frame had needed to be relocated by Preti (from the so-called exterior of the dividing wall to its current location at the back of the apse), why didn't he simply make a new frame to match the High Baroque ornamental scheme he created around it at its new site? The ornament does not match, I would argue, because Preti never relocated the *Beheading* or needed to meddle with its frame. It also needs to be asked: Why was a lunette-shaped picture created for the oratory in about 1620 if it lacked a vault at the altar end? For this debate, one would like to rely on the architectural details shown in Wolfgang Kilian's illustration of the oratory engraved for Christian von Osterhausen's book on the Knights and their statutes, *Eigentlicher und gründlicher Bericht* . . . (Augsburg, 1650). But Kilian's image is too summary to settle the issue (see Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading*," 164, fig. 9). See also Stone, "Painting in Exile: Caravaggio and the Island of Malta," in *Caravaggio and Painters of Realism in Malta*, ed. Cynthia de Giorgio and Keith Sciberras, exh. cat. (Malta: Midsea Books, 2007), 65–78, 216–18, esp. n. 66.

8. The canvas measures 11 ft. 9¾ in. by 17 ft. ¾ in. (3.6 by 5.2 m), but originally it was almost surely larger. It has been hypothesized, based on asymmetrical strainer marks, that the canvas's width was probably reduced at some point after completion by approximately 7⅛–7⅞ in. (18–20 cm) by a vertical cut along the left edge. See Marco Ciatti and Chiara Silla, eds., *Caravaggio al Carmine: Il restauro della Decollazione del Battista di Malta*, exh. cat. (Milan: Skira, 1999), 27–28. On the *passaggio* (or "passage money"), see Dominic Cutajar and Carmel Cassar, "Budgeting in 17th Century Malta: An Insight into the Administration of the Comun Tesoro," in *Mid-Med Bank, Report and Accounts* (Malta: Mid-Med Bank, 1983), 22–32, esp. 27–29. They briefly mention the idea (though without reference to documents) that the *passaggio* could be satisfied with the proffering of a work of art in lieu of money. No payments to Caravaggio have been discovered in the archives in Malta, leading one to suspect that he donated his works. Even though his eventual knighthood was of an honorary nature, he would have been at pains to distance himself from the idea that he made his living by selling works of art: by statute, practicing any sort of trade disqualified one from becoming a knight. For discussion of the sky-high fees of the *passaggio* for certain types of knighthoods, as well as the prejudice against would-be honorary members who "live by working for pay [*vivono con la mercede*]," see David M. Stone, "Bad Habit: Scipione Borghese, Wignacourt, and the Problem of Cigoli's Knighthood," in *Celebratio Amicitiae, Essays in Honour of Giovanni Bonello*, ed. Maroma Camilleri and Theresa Vella (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2006), 207–29.

9. The Confraternita del Rosario e della Misericordia e Pietà dei Carcerati at St. John's were refugees from an oratory at another church whose expansion plans had impinged on them. The confraternity moved to St. John's when they learned that an oratory was being built there, over part of the cemetery, by other members of the order. For the documents, see Sciberras, "Confraternita della Misericordia," 760–63. As the latter has explained, the timing was very convenient for all concerned: short of money, Wignacourt invited the soon-to-be homeless members of the Confraternita del Rosario to use the new oratory at St. John's for their devotions if they would contribute to the building's completion. In this period, the Order of St. John got creative in raising additional money for the oratory. The Wignacourt Chapter General of 1604 [1603 ab incarn.] instituted a new rule for punishing the prior and vice prior of the Conventual Church. If either was caught quarreling, 10 scudi had to be paid "for the benefit of the Oratory of the Beheaded St. John [*da applicarsi all'Oratorio di S. Giovanni Decollato*]." See *Gli statuti della Sacra Religione di S. Gio. Gerosolimitano con le ordinazioni del Capitolo Generale celebrato nell'anno 1603* (Rome: Stampatori Generali, 1609), 60. This book contains the laws in force during Caravaggio's stay on the island. A fine for dress-code violations by conventual chaplains is mentioned by Sciberras, "Confraternita della Misericordia," 764 and n. 29. On the Roman Decollati (founded in Florence in 1488), their pious work with those facing execution, and the art they commissioned for their church and oratory (which Caravaggio would have been familiar with from his Roman years), see Jean S. Weisz, *Pittura e Misericordia: The Oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato in Rome* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1984). Already in the sixteenth century, the Maltese "Rosarianti" 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 Rosarians 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 official recognition from the Decollati. For the documents, see Mikiel Fsadni, *Id-Dumnikani fil-Belt* (Valletta: Veritas Press, 1971), 90–103, esp. 93–95. See also Edgar G. Montanaro, *Storia della Ven.da Arciconfraternita del SSmo. Rosario e della Misericordia* (Valletta: Empire Press, 1942); and Sciberras, "Confraternita della Misericordia."

10. Sciberras, "Confraternita della Misericordia," 766 and n. 51, notes that the "Tribunale" (the voting members of the Sguardium) would retire to a small sacristy, adjacent to the oratory, to deliberate. Sentencing and defrocking occurred in the oratory proper. It is not clear, however, where this small sacristy was (perhaps in the same area, adjacent to the left side of the chapel area, where today there is a storage room). On February 1, 1613 (National Library of Malta [hereafter, NLM]: Archives of the Order of Malta [hereafter, AOM] 458, Liber Bullarum 1612–15, fol. 297v), it was observed that the current sacristy was "too cramped [*troppo angosta*]" and that a larger one needed to be built on the cemetery side of the oratory. In the Archive of the Magistral Palace, Sovereign Military Order of Malta, in Via Condotti in Rome, is an unpublished manuscript of 1637 (MS 30) entitled "Statuti et Ordinationi del Hoserhausen," which may be a draft (written in Italian for the order's approval?) of Christian von Osterhausen's (unillustrated) first edition of his commentary on the statutes: *Statuta, Ordnungen und Gebräuche* (Frankfurt, 1644). The author notes (117) that the judges retired to a separate room "behind the altar [*dietro l'altare*]" to deliberate. It is difficult to know, without more information, exactly how to interpret this phrase. See also n. 7 above, regarding the original location of Caravaggio's altarpiece. I suspect Caravaggio would have known when he designed his painting that the oratory was going to be used for the Sguardium. However, the question awaits further research. The first defrocking trial in the hall, in September 1608, occurred only a few weeks after his work was completed. The second trial was Caravaggio's, in November–December. See Sciberras, "Confraternita della Misericordia," 766. The picture's knowing allusions to the idea of "giustizia" and "misericordia" might just as easily have been inspired by the activities of the Confraternita della Misericordia, which had moved to St. John's nearly five years earlier. See Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading*"; and idem, " 'Fra Michelangelo,' " 92–95.

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 Randon (Malta: Mid-Med Bank, 1989), 1–18, esp. n. 13, unpublished legal documents of 1613, 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 Castellaniae, Acta Originalia, vol. 85 (1613), fols. 157r–167r, 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. 163v): "l'imagini dovessero in tutti modi essere della giusta statura d'un huomo per fare più bella apparenza, et sopra tutto per eccitare più à devotione gl'astanti" (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' souls, Fra Antonio Peña de Lerma, Cappellano d'Obbedienza (Chaplain of Obedience), is named throughout the lawsuit 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 complete in the winter of 1604, it must have had an altar by this point, since installation ceremonies require one.

13. Hannibal P. Scicluna, *The Church of St. John in Valletta* (Rome: Casa M. Danesi, 1955), 138–45. Some of the Baptist's relics were preserved in the oratory from an early date, but the most important of these, the right hand of John the Baptist, joined the others only very late in the seventeenth century. It was translated to the oratory from the Camera delle Reliquie in the sacristy of St. John's immediately after the silver and gilt-bronze reliquary designed for it by Ciro Ferri arrived in Malta in November 1689. For a detailed documentary study, see Keith Sciberras, *Roman Baroque Sculpture for the Knights of Malta* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2004), 80–94. For the relic itself, which was looted by Napoléon and then held by Czar Paul I of Russia (the self-proclaimed 72nd grand master of the order), see Victor F. Denaro, "The Hand of John the Baptist," *Revue de l'Ordre Souverain Militaire de Malte,* n.s., 16, no. 1 (January–March 1958): 33–38. After having been lost for decades, the relic has recently resurfaced; it is currently in the Monastery of Cetinje, the capital of Montenegro.

14. For a fine survey of the history of the order with extensive bibliography, 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, "Virtuosity Honoured, Chivalry Disgraced," chap. 2 of Sciberras and Stone, *Caravaggio,* 17–40.

16. During the order's Malta period (1530–1798), the statutes and ordinances detailing the various rules on becoming a knight (typically discussed 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 for the Knights by this alternative: the "habit outside the *convento* [*abito fuori convento*]" required a much higher *passaggio* than the norm. Nonetheless, despite being lucrative, mail-order knighthoods were frowned on, since they left the order with fewer men to protect the island or serve aboard the Knights' galleys. And increasingly 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, entrusted with the mentoring of the novices, worried that the spiritual life of the order was in peril (see Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading,*" 168). Though it would not have entirely mitigated complaints about his lack of nobility, the fact that Caravaggio came to the island in person and completed his novitiate would have garnered much respect.

17. For example, there were fines for wearing the habit of the order before having been properly professed. Wignacourt's correspondence (as we know it from more than twenty volumes in the National Library of Malta) mentions such infractions, which typically occurred off the island, where the pretenders mistakenly thought no one would report them.

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 now also *Caravaggio a Roma: Una vita dal vero,* ed. Michele Di Sivo 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 immediately to await trial. Caravaggio was probably already in custody by the time of the *festa* of the Decollation on August 29. If the dedication ceremony 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 crippling musicians' strike that probably included one of the men (the organist, Fra Prospero Coppini) involved in the brawl. The fanfare Caravaggio's picture deserved was not to be. By the beginning of October, Caravaggio had escaped from Fort St. Angelo and made his way to Syracuse in Sicily. On December 1, 1608, he was tried in absentia (right in front of his freshly completed masterpiece in the oratory; see Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading*") and stripped of his habit for having left the island without a license (a serious crime in a military establishment, which not only needed able men for defense but which also carefully controlled entrances and exits for fear of spies and the escape of slaves). For a general discussion of Caravaggio's crime in Malta, see Sciberras, "Virtuosity Honoured," with previous bibliography. See also Giovanni Bonello, "Caravaggio: Friends and Victims in Malta," in idem, *Histories of Malta,* vol. 6, 67–79.

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

20. Giorgio Bonsanti and Mina Gregori, eds., *Caravaggio da Malta a Firenze,* exh. cat. (Milan: Skira, 1996); Ciatti and Silla, *Caravaggio al Carmine;* and Theresa M. Vella, ed., *The Return of Caravaggio's "The Beheading of the Baptist" to Malta* (Malta: National Museum of Fine Arts, 1999).

21. The circular loss, which was consolidated in *tratteggio* (hatching) by the Istituto Centrale del Restauro (the technique is visible in Fig. 5), is probably quite old, though I do not know exactly when, or under what conditions, the damage occurred. Old copies, such as the large, nearly ruined canvas in Zamora Cathedral, are unfortunately of little use in confirming the original composition of the pool of blood (and thus the degree to which the restoration is a good reflection of the original). See Alfred Moir, *Caravaggio and His Copyists* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 101, for a list of copies. For an untraced copy by Silvestro Querio, see n. 35 below.

22. Roberto Carità, "Il restauro dei dipinti caravaggeschi della cattedrale di Malta," *Bollettino dell'Istituto Centrale del Restauro,* fasc. 29–30 (1957): 41–82, esp. 61.

23. In his journal, Nicolas Bénard, *Le Voyage de Hierusalem* (Paris, 1621), 78–80, noted that he arrived in Malta on November 30, 1616, and later visited St. John's church and oratory. In the latter he saw "an excellent altarpiece of the beheading of the same saint which the aforementioned grand master had placed there, this is a very excellent work by the hand of the late Michelangelo as he remarks in the inscription [*une excellente table d'autel de la décollation du mesme sainct que ledict Seigneur grand Maître y a faict mettre, c'est un oeuvre très-excellent de la main de feu Michaël-Ange comme il se remarque en la souscription*]." Bénard, quoted in Jean Balsamo, "Les Caravage de Malte: Le témoignage des voyageurs français (1616–1678)," in *Come dipingeva il Caravaggio: Atti della giornata di studio,* ed. Mina Gregori (Milan: Electa, 1996), 151–53; but see Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading,*" 164 n. 22, for a slightly different interpretation of the text.

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 seventeenth centuries is much less stable than one might expect. Miles L. Chappell and David M. Stone, "Fabrizio Boschi, 'Pittor di Brio': A New Bozzetto 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 Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: Ricerche e interpretazioni* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974), 209. For a contrary view, see Keith Christiansen's entry on the *Saint Francis in Meditation* (Museo Civico, Cremona), in *Caravaggio: The Final Years,* exh. cat. (Naples: Electa, 2005), 104–6: "Although a vein of tragedy and guilt runs through all of Caravaggio's post-Roman paintings and poses the central problem of interpretation for his religious art, it would be wrong to attempt to link these traits with presumed feelings of remorse over the killing of Ranuccio Tomassoni in May 1606. . . . Personal experience certainly enriched Caravaggio's

paintings, but as part of his quest to endow his pictures with the urgency of actuality, not as an element of self-confession."

27. Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 231. The idea of an "unusual preoccupation with beheading" seems to me an exaggeration. The oratory was dedicated to the Decollation of the Baptist and no other subject for its altarpiece would have been appropriate. It is not as if Caravaggio chose this theme. His other depictions of beheadings (*Judith and Holofernes*; *David with the Head of Goliath*; *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*) deal in subjects popular long before Caravaggio interpreted them. Yet Hibbard is surely correct that 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.

28. Maurizio Calvesi, *Le realtà del Caravaggio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), 131–36.

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 Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London: Phaidon, 1998); Bert Treffers, *Caravaggio nel sangue del Battista* (Rome: Shakespeare and Company, 2000); Maurizio Marini, *Caravaggio "pictor praestantissimus": L'iter artistico completo di uno dei massimi rivoluzionari dell'arte di tutti i tempi,* 3rd ed. (Rome: Newton Compton, 2001); John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2001); and John Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), esp. chap. 5, "Violence"; 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 Cinotti, *Michelangelo Merisi detto il Caravaggio: Tutte le opere,* reprinted from *I pittori bergamaschi: Il seicento,* vol. 1 (Bergamo: Bolis, 1983).

30. The Knights of St. John, from the end of the thirteenth century, were divided by nationality into tongues, or *langues.* See Nicholson, *Knights Hospitaller,* 73. For the *Saint Jerome,* 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 13, 1607. For a copy after the *Saint Jerome* (private collection) that contains the mysterious monogram GNFDC, see Roberta Lapucci, *L'eredità tecnica del Caravaggio a Napoli, in Sicilia e a Malta: Spigolature sul Caravaggismo meridionale* (Saonara: Il Prato, 2009), 69–73, figs. 14–18. In my opinion, this work, which I have seen both before and after cleaning, is not (as the author claims) by Caravaggio but by a copyist—perhaps a local Maltese artist—working in about 1610–20.

31. Stefania Macioce, "Caravaggio a Malta: Il *S. Girolamo* e lo stemma Malaspina," in *L'ultimo Caravaggio e la cultura artistica a Napoli in Sicilia e a Malta,* ed. Maurizio Calvesi (Syracuse: Ediprint, 1987), 175–81; and N. Gallo, "Lo stemma dei Malaspina di Fosdinovo sulla tela del *San Gerolamo* del Caravaggio a Malta: Note e osservazioni," *Atti e Memorie della Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Antiche Provincie Modenesi,* 11th ser., 22 (2000): 255–62. The picture was damaged in 1985 when it was stolen from the Museum of St. John's (see Zerafa, *Caravaggio Diaries*). It was restored by ICR in Rome in 1987. Based on a general analysis, the restorers concluded that the coat of arms is contiguous with the original paint layer and thus was probably painted by Caravaggio himself. See Giuseppe Basile, "L'approccio metodologico," in *Il "San Gerolamo" di Caravaggio a Malta: Dal furto al restauro,* by M. E. Giralico et al. (Rome: Istituto Centrale del Restauro, 1991), 8 and n. 1. It is unclear whether ICR took a sample for a cross section. It is 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 this area. Comparison of 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," 10) reveals the greatly superior quality of that on the *Saint Jerome.* Marini, *Caravaggio,* 542, cat. no. 92, by contrast, thinks the *stemma* 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 is a fascinating issue—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 La Valletta: La Cappella di Santa Caterina della Lingua d'Italia e le committenze del Gran Maestro Gregorio Carafa* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2008). I thank the two restorers (Guido and Mantella) for discussing their observations on the four Malaspina arms with me.

32. A member of the Florentine Accademia del Disegno who designed one of the most important topographical views of Valletta, Francesco dell'Antella served for many years *in convento* 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 friend 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 Antellesi, after he returned to Florence to take charge of his *commenda* (lands and buildings he controlled for the order and from which he collected rents). He was also a patron of Giovanni da San Giovanni and Filippo Paladini. See Ludovica Sebregondi Fiorentini, "Francesco dell'Antella, Caravaggio, Paladini e altri," *Paragone* 383–85 (1982): 107–22; David M. Stone, "In Praise of Caravaggio's *Sleeping Cupid:* New Documents for Francesco dell'Antella in Malta and Florence," *Melita Historica* 12, no. 2 (1997): 165–77; Ludovica Sebregondi, *San Jacopo in Campo Corbolini a Firenze* (Florence: Edifir, 2005), esp. chap. 5; and Stone, " 'Fra Michelangelo,' " 80–85. On Michelangelo Jr., see Janie Cole, *Music, Spectacle and Cultural Brokerage in Early Modern Italy: Michelangelo Buonarroti il Giovane,* 2 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 2011).

33. The slabs and their elaborate Latin inscriptions have been painstakingly photographed and transcribed in Dane Munro, *Memento Mori: A Companion to the Most Beautiful Floor in the World,* 2 vols. (Malta: MJ Publications, 2005); reviewed by Ingrid D. Rowland, "The Floor of Floors," *New York Review of Books* 52, no. 20 (December 15, 2005): 61–63.

34. The "cerimoniale" for investiture varied little over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the basic procedures and vows having been established by the statutes in the medieval period. But the interest in the ceremony was such that it was several times published in the vernacular as a separate text. See, for example, *Trattato delle cerimonie che s'vsano nel creare i caualieri di s. Giouanni Gierosolimitano: Con la descrittione dell'isola di Malta* (Rome: Antonio Blado Stampatori Camerali, 1577); and Fra Horatio Dentis, *Trattato delle ceremonie che s'osservano nel dar l'habito à i Cavalieri della Sacra Religione di S. Giovanni Gierosolimitano* (Turin: Agostino Disserolio, 1603). For the question of the young Cavalier d'Arpino's involvement in designing illustrations for the Verdala Statutes (the *Statuta Hospitalis Hierusalem*) as well as for the problem of the book's date of publication (probably printed in 1586–87, with some editions also containing an index printed in 1588), see Herwarth Röttgen, *Il Cavalier D'Arpino,* exh. cat. (Rome: De Luca Editore, 1973), 146, cat. no. 68, 172–73, cat. no. I; Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, "Privilegio Papale per la pubblicazione degli statuti dell'Ordine di San Giovanni di Malta (Roma, 1588) / The *Privilegio* for the Publication of the Statutes of the Order of St. John in Malta (Rome, 1588)," *Rivista Internazionale del Sovrano Ordine di Malta* 23 (1991): 28–38; Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading,*" 165; Herwarth Röttgen, *Il Cavalier Giuseppe Cesari D'Arpino: Un grande pittore nello splendore della fama e nell'incostanza della fortuna* (Rome: Ugo Bozzi, 2002), 510–11; Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, *Copyright in the Renaissance: Prints and the Privilegio in Sixteenth-Century Venice and Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 147–51; Giovanni Bonello, "The Cavalier d'Arpino and the Statutes of Grand Master Verdalle," in *Histories of Malta,* vol. 8, *Mysteries and Myths* (Malta: Midsea Books for the Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2007), 75–87; and Herwarth Röttgen, "Die Statuten des Malteser-Ordens von 1586 und ihre Illustratoren," in *Società, cultura e vita religiosa in età moderna: Studi in onore di Romeo De Maio,* ed. Luigi Gulia, Ingo Herklotz, and Stefano Zen (Sora: Centro Studi Sorani "Vincenzo Patriarca," 2009), 437–70. I thank Prof. Röttgen for sharing his observations with me concerning the publication date of the *Statuta Hospitalis.*

35. One of the most annoying facts of life for the administration of the order was having to defend itself against the creditors of defunct knights. In the *Sacra Religione*'s view, once the *spoglio* (the four-fifths of 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 *dispropriamento* (a will, which needed a *licenza*—a license—from the grand master to be written and considered legal). One can get a clear sense of how the system worked by reading the dying words of Commendator Mandosio Mandosi, whose *dispropriamento* was registered on July 5,

1629, in the order's Holy Infirmary in Valletta (NLM, AOM, Arch. 1720, fols. 180v–182r). The complete text is transcribed in Giuseppe Mizzi, "Spigolando fra documenti inediti (sec. XVII–XIX)," *Melita Historica* 5, no. 2 (1968): 39–56. The document begins with Mandosi's wish to be buried among his brethren in the church of St. John. It then continues with a startling revelation of interest to Caravaggio scholars: Mandosi owed 200 scudi to an obscure Roman painter named Silvestro Querio who had painted for him many works as yet unpaid for, including twelve or thirteen paintings of the saints of the order and a large (untraced) copy of Caravaggio's *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* in the oratory ("copia della decolatione di San Giovanni dell'oratorio di quatordici palmi di lunghezza e dieci di larghezza"). The testament states that Signor Prospero Mandosi, Fra Mandosio's brother, should pay the painter. The rest of the *dispropriamento* includes several other works of art and a typical list of household items and weapons, some no doubt of a certain value. Anything not detailed in this list would have gone straight to the Comun Tesoro of the order. It was standard procedure for young men aspiring to knighthood to have their families officially disinherit them before beginning the novitiate. Otherwise, the order would potentially be heirs to gigantic fortunes.

36. There is no single synthetic study on the *spoglio*. However, the following contains a useful introduction with several important references: Joseph Galea, *An Inventory of the Manuscript Volumes of the "Spoils" (1549–1772) Preserved in the Archives at the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Malta* (Malta: for the Malta Study Center of the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, 1988). There is no substitute, however, for reading the rules themselves (though the archival record demonstrates the inconsistency with which they were enforced). For the only English translation of the statutes of the early modern period, together with the ordinations (ad hoc laws) passed at the Chapter General (periodic legislative summit meeting) of Grand Master Antoine de Paule in 1631, see Abbé de Vertot, *The History of the Knights of Malta,* 2 vols. (London, 1728), facsimile ed. (Malta: Midsea Books, Melitensia Book Club, 1983); vol. 2 contains the statutes. (For the Wignacourt Statutes and Ordinations confirmed at the Chapter General of 1604 [1603 ab incarnat.], see n. 9 above.) For the most part, these more easily accessible later editions of the statutes will serve well as a general introduction to the rules and procedures of the order during the 1607–8 period. A remarkable legal discussion (unpublished, late seventeenth century) by Fra Giovanni Maria Caravita (Naples 1632–Syracuse 1699) demonstrates just how extreme the interpretation of the vow of poverty and the *spoglio* rules had become by the end of the seicento. NLM, MS 188: "Trattato sopra il Voto della Povertà del titolo primo della Regola composto dal fù V. Priore di Lombardia Caravita," states under the heading "Quarto Punto: A favore di chi acquistino i nostri fratelli privati dell'habito" (186–91) that defrocked members of the order must still leave their belongings to the *Religione*—even goods purchased after the *privatio habitus*. If this law was in force when Caravaggio was in Sicily, the Knights could have legally seized all his belongings and probably also any money he had earned from selling paintings.

37. See n. 31 above.

38. In Grand Master Wignacourt's *dispropriamento,* NLM AOM 924 "A," fol. 2r–v, he declares that his coat of arms—displayed on an impressive series of fortified watchtowers he constructed at his own expense all around the Maltese coast—are to be maintained and never removed, and that future grand masters are prohibited from putting their *stemmi* on the towers.

39. In his biography of the artist (1617–21), Giulio Mancini called Caravaggio's father, Fermo Merisi, "mastro di casa et architetto del Marchese di Caravaggio" (Hibbard, *Caravaggio,* 345–47). But, as Giacomo Berra, *Il giovane Caravaggio in Lombardia: Ricerche documentarie sui Merisi, gli Aratori e i marchesi di Caravaggio* (Florence: Fondazione Longhi, 2005), 116–19, has shown, Fermo was merely a "muratore"—a stonemason. Maurizio Marini, "L'alfa e l'omega di Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, pittore: Qualche precisazione documentaria sulla nascita e sulla morte," *Artibus et Historiae* 20, no. 4 (1999): 131–49, illustrates a coat of arms for the Merisi family and asserts that both Caravaggio's parents (Fermo Merisi and Lucia Aratori) belonged to the "minor nobility of rural Lombardy" (131). Berra (147–49) convincingly argues that the coat of arms in question did not belong to Caravaggio's family and that the latter, based on extensive documentary research, was not noble—on either the paternal or the maternal side.

40. For the arrest documents, see Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955). See also Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life.*

41. See also the comments on the portrait by Philip Sohm, "Caravaggio's Deaths," *Art Bulletin* 84, no. 3 (2002): 452–53.

42. A fundamental source for understanding the Knights' attitude toward nobility may be found in another unpublished manuscript of the late seicento by Fra Giovanni Maria Caravita: NLM, MS 184, "Trattato della nobiltà, e specialmente di quella che si professa dai Cavalieri di San Giovanni." On the subject of painting and other arts, the author is very straightforward. The arts do not detract from nobility as long as they are done only for pleasure and not for financial gain (165): "9. Finalmente si dubità se l'essercitio dell'arti liberali faccia altrui decadere della nobiltà e deve dirsi di nò, poiche sono honorevoli, e degne di persone nobili come ne anche la Pittura, e scoltura, ed altri simili. Intendendo di tutte, che siano esercitate per solo diletto, e non per trarre utile, 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 Malta. As Joanna Woods-Marsden, *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, claiming descent from a 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, BACCIUS BANDINELLUS FLORENTINUS SANCTI IACOPI EQUES 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 faciebat Bandinello.'. . . Other lampoons give a further idea of the possible play of words surrounding his title: 'Io son quel nominato Cavaliero, / Baccio scarpellator de' Bandinelli . . .' (I am one nominated Knight, Baccio de' Bandinelli, stonemason). 'Fu fatto gentilhuom in due hore: / non ti crepa el cuore / Veder un scarpellin comendatore?' (He was created a gentleman in two hours. Doesn't it make your heart croak to see a stonemason as 'commander'?)." Words of resentment regarding Caravaggio's title have not 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 *tumulto* 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. Caravaggio's *confratres* in 1607–8 may have been unprepared for what ensued. (It should be noted, though, that way back in 1566, a year after the Great Siege of Malta, the Fleming Simon Provost—master of the Mint and a silversmith—was made an unprofessed brother of the *Religione.*) 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, Paladini was sentenced in 1587 to row on the grand duke's galleys. Before 1589, he was transferred to the Knights, still as a *forzato* (prisoner condemned to hard labor). Ashore in Malta, he was recognized as a gifted painter and released to fulfill important commissions in 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, Martino Garzes, made Paladini an official member of the master's 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 *habiti di grazia magistrale* (habits of magistral grace)—so much so that, as discussed below, these honorary titles were later banned, in 1604—in six years of hard work, Paladini, so far as we know, was never considered for membership in the order. 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 Attributions," 26–34, and "Simon Provost: A Sequel," 35–40, in *Art in Malta: Discoveries and Recoveries* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1999). On Paladini in Malta, see Sebregondi Fiorentini, "Francesco dell'Antella"; Stone, "Caravaggio's *Sleeping Cupid*"; and Keith Sciberras and David M. Stone, "Saints and Heroes: Frescos by Filippo Paladini and Leonello Spada," in *Palace of the Grand Masters in Valletta,* ed. Albert Ganado (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2001), 139–57.

45. For an overview of how the reception rules varied by langue, see Sire, *Knights of Malta.* For a specialized study dealing with nobility and reception into the order, focusing on the Italian Langue, see Angelantonio Spagnoletti, *Stato, aristocrazie e Ordine di Malta nell'Italia moderna* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1988). See also Caravita, "Trattato della Nobiltà."

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 Solaro (Fig. 13), see Tomaso Ricardi di Netro and Luisa Clotilde Gentile, eds., *"Gentiluomini christiani e religiosi cavalieri": Nove secoli dell'Ordine di Malta in Piemonte,* exh. cat. (Milan: Electa, 2000), 75–77.

47. The Knights were unusually clear about what constituted nobility. The topic, however, was problematic in Italy and elsewhere in the early modern period. For a fundamental overview, see Claudio Donati, *L'idea della nobiltà in Italia, secoli XIV–XVIII* (Rome: Editori Laterza, 1995). For some interesting observations about the Knights, in particular, the trend toward *tightening* the requirements for admission during Caravaggio's period, see chap. 7, "Le 'prove di nobiltà' dei cavalieri italiani dell'Ordine di Malta (1555–1612)." The question of nobility in the blood versus nobility from virtue was a hot issue among Renaissance humanists. Artists, naturally, took the "virtue" side in their quest to raise 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 Clichtove (1472–1543) 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 neither 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 branded with any mark 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 Clichtove," in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts,* vol. 2, *Political Philosophy,* ed. Jill Kray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249. See also Albert Rabil Jr., trans. and ed., *Knowledge, Goodness, and Power: The Debate over Nobility among Quattrocento Italian Humanists* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Renaissance Society of America, 1991). Theories such as Clichtove's would have been considered heretical by the Order of St. John.

48. 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. On the politics of youth in the Order of St. John, see David M. Stone, "The Apelles of Malta: Caravaggio and His Grand Master" (forthcoming), which examines Caravaggio's *Portrait of Alof de Wignacourt and a Page* (Musée du Louvre, Paris). There were boys as young as eleven in Malta earning seniority toward commanderies from the day they arrived *in convento.* For the rivalry between Caravaggio and Guido, see Richard E. Spear, *The "Divine" Guido: Religion, Sex, Money and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 288.

50. Sciberras, "Virtuosity Honoured," 38 n. 4.

51. Clearly a good rule to maintain. But, surprisingly, Malta was a magnet for *disgraziati,* who came to the island to clear their names by serving the *Religione.* For a witty discussion of the checkered past of even some of the most illustrious knights, see Giovanni Bonello, "From Rogues to Grand Masters and Bishops," in *Histories of Malta,* vol. 2, *Figments and Fragments* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2001), 18–25. For Caravaggio's admission, including the diplomatic correspondence involved, see John Azzopardi, "Caravaggio's Admission into the Order: Papal Dispensation for the Crime of Murder," in Farrugia Randon, *Caravaggio in Malta,* 45–56; and Stefania Macioce, "Caravaggio a Malta e i suoi referenti: Notizie d'archivio," *Storia dell'Arte* 81 (1994): 207–28.

52. For the question of Michelangelo's signature on the Vatican *Pietà* as a defense of his honor, see n. 75 below.

53. 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).

54. The archival record, as I know it, suggests that in the early seicento, the Knights—at least on the level of an organization—were not heavily preoccupied with artistic concerns. Caravaggio's arrival may have sparked a change in this attitude, but it was slow to manifest itself widely. In the second half of the century, by contrast, the order indulged in a level of artistic patronage that is truly astonishing. The arrival of Mattia Preti (1659) and the importation from Rome of magnificent works of sculpture seem to have coincided with a new fiscal, political, military, and religious outlook. The Knights continued, nonetheless, to rely on "gifts" when they could. Preti, who had previously complained about the miserliness of the order to Don Antonio Ruffo of Messina, donated one of his greatest achievements, the decoration of the vault of St. John's, to the brotherhood; see John T. Spike, "Mattia Preti's Passage to Malta," *Burlington Magazine* 120 (August 1978): 501. On an individual level of patronage, there is no question that knights such as Grand Master Wignacourt and Fra Francesco dell'Antella were interested in Caravaggio. But even they did not fully exploit his presence on the island. Indeed, it is perplexing 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 Leonello Spada in 1610, the period between Caravaggio's escape from the island and the arrival of Preti is something of a drought artistically.

55. For the Wignacourt portrait, see Stone, "Apelles of Malta."

56. Osterhausen, *Eigentlicher,* pl. 2.

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. The comparison to Saint Peter Martyr was first introduced by Calvesi, *Realtà del Caravaggio,* 367.

59. 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 Benvenuto Cellini in casting the *Perseus,* for which see Michael Cole, "Cellini's Blood," *Art Bulletin* 81, no. 2 (June 1999): 215–35, esp. 225.

60. For some examples, see Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennyslvania Press, 2004), who discusses blood imagery in the liturgical hymns of the sixth-century poet Romanos the Melodist. The poet "habitually inserts acts of writing into his retellings; he figures Jesus' death on the cross as an act of self-inscription where Christ signs a ransom for humanity using his body as parchment and his blood as ink" (13). In his "On Doubting Thomas," Romanos employs a similar conceit and uses Greek words that in late antiquity, according to Krueger, became standard for "I sign" and "signature." Romanos suggests (in Krueger's interpretation) that "Thomas's hand underwrites the authenticity of the risen body. Like a notary, he testifies to the accuracy of the document. . . . Thus, Romanos imagines Thomas's hand touching Christ's wounds to be like dipping a pen into an inkwell" (179; Greek text omitted). My thanks to Georgia Frank of Colgate University for this valuable reference.

61. *Le lettere di S. Caterina da Siena,* ed. Piero Misciattelli and Niccolò Tommaseo, 6 vols. (Siena: Giuntini Bentivoglio, 1913–22), trans. Suzanne Noffke, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena,* 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000–8).

62. 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 Sources of the Faust Tradition, from Simon Magus to Lessing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936).

63. Is this Marlowe's musing on writer's block?

64. The motif also occurs in Shakespeare's poem "A Lover's Complaint" (1609): ". . . Found yet moe letters sadly penn'd in blood."

65. Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading,*" 169.

66. Ibid., 168–69; and Sciberras, "Confraternita della Misericordia."

67. The *carovane* (or caravans) are the expeditions aboard the galleys required of all knights aspiring to the rank of Knight of Justice. Each caravan 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 Garrané,* ed. le comte de Luppé (Paris: Auguste Aubry, 1865).

68. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 213. For an illustrated survey of blood imagery across many cultures and time periods, see James M. Bradburne, ed., *Blood: Art, Power, Politics and Pathology,* exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 2001).

69. 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 S. Ligori 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), 275–76, notes that on August 1, 1586, after petitions by S. Ligori's abbess, the grand master and Sovereign Council in Malta decreed that all members of the order present in Naples during the annual feast were henceforth to attend the ceremony dressed in their "manti di punta" (their formal habits).

70. For the print and the various painted versions (in which the ocean is blood red), see the entry by Gaia Bindi (cat. no. 9), in *Pittura barocca*

romana, dal Cavalier d'Arpino a Fratel Pozzo: La collezione Fagiolo, ed. Elena Gigli et al., exh. cat. (Milan: Skira, 1999), 76–77. See also the fundamental discussion by Irving Lavin, "Bernini's Death," *Art Bulletin* 54, no. 2 (June 1972): 158–86.

71. Calvesi, *Realtà del Caravaggio,* 41–42, 366–68; Stone, "The Context of Caravaggio's *Beheading,*" 169; and Puglisi, *Caravaggio,* 297–308. For the iconographic traditions, see Barbara G. Lane, "Rogier's Saint John and Miraflores Altarpieces Reconsidered," *Art Bulletin* 60, no. 4 (December 1978): 655–72.

72. On Caravaggio's arrogant and satirical personality (Giovanni Baglione, in his *vita,* called him "altiero e satirico"), and for the idea of "audacity" in Renaissance art theory and how it might have been regarded by the Lombard painter, see Stone, "Self and Myth." The signature is quite large. The letters are mostly 2 in. (5 cm) high, and the inscription's width is approximately 14 in. (36 cm). This last measurement includes traces of the missing letters that follow.

73. For the *tumulto,* see Sciberras, "Virtuosity Honoured."

74. My discussion below is indebted to Rona Goffen, "Signatures: Inscribing Identity in Italian Renaissance Art," *Viator* 32 (2001): 303–70. I have also learned much from André Chastel, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn et al., "L'art de la signature," *Revue de l'Art* 26 (1974): 8–56; Creighton Gilbert, "Lo stile nelle firme del Savoldo," in *Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo pittore bresciano, Atti del Convegno (Brescia 21–22 Maggio 1983),* ed. G. Panazza (Brescia: Edizioni del Moretto, 1985), 21–28; Victor I. Stoichita, "Nomi in cornice," in *Der Künstler über Sich in seinem Werk: Internationales Symposium der Bibliotheca Hertziana Rom 1989,* ed. Matthias Winner (Weinheim: VCH, Acta Humaniora, 1992), 293–315; Louisa Matthew, "The Painter's Presence: Signatures in Venetian Renaissance Pictures," *Art Bulletin* 80, no. 4 (December 1998): 616–48; Patricia Rubin, "Signposts of Invention: Artists' Signatures in Italian Renaissance Art," *Art History* 29, no. 4 (September 2006): 563–99; and Tobias Burg, *Die Signatur: Formen und Funktionen vom Mittelalter bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* (Münster: LIT, 2007). For two valuable theoretical essays, see Claude Gandelman, "The Semiotics of Signatures in Painting: A Peircian Analysis," *American Journal of Semiotics* 3, no. 3 (1985): 73–108; and Omar Calabrese and Betty Gigante, "La signature du peintre," *La Part de l'Oeil* 5 (1989): 27–43. On the interesting subject of disguised authorial signatures in medieval literature, see Victoria Kirkham, *Fabulous Vernacular: Boccaccio's "Filocolo" and the Art of Medieval Fiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), chap. 2, "Signed Pieces."

75. As Caravaggio surely knew, his namesake Michelangelo Buonarroti had signed only one work in his long career, the Vatican *Pietà.* The inscription's bold appearance across the breast of the Virgin seems to have been controversial. Giorgio Vasari tells two very different stories about it. In the first (1550), he explains the signature as the result of Michelangelo's satisfaction with the statue on which he had toiled so hard. See Vasari, *Le vite. . . .* (Florence: Torrentino, 1550), ed. Luciano Bellosi and Aldo Rossi (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1991), vol. 2, 886. In the 1568 edition, Vasari provides a different explanation: Michelangelo, standing in St. Peter's near his recently completed work, found a group of Lombards praising it. One of them asked the other who had made it; the reply was: "Our Gobbo from Milan" (Cristoforo Solari da Angera). Incensed that his labors should be attributed to another, Michelangelo, one night, shut himself in the chapel with a little light and his chisels and carved his name. See idem, *Le vite. . . .* (Florence: Giunti, 1568), ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1906), vol. 7, 152. Ascanio Condivi (1553), perhaps on Michelangelo's instruction, does not mention the signature at all. As Paul Barolsky, *The Faun in the Garden: Michelangelo and the Poetic Origins of Italian Renaissance Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 144, has remarked: "The story told by Vasari deflects attention away from the probability that Michelangelo had in fact signed the work when he originally carved it. Why? Because Michelangelo's signature could have been construed as a demonstration of the artist's *superbia* on the breast of the very personification of *umiltà.* The fable of Michelangelo signing his work after it was attributed to somebody else thus ingeniously protected him from the imputation of sinful pride, justifying his signature, instead, as the defense of his very name and honor." See Goffen, "Signatures," 320–28; and Aileen June Wang, "Michelangelo's Signature," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 447–73, with extensive bibliography. See also Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, "Michelangelo's Pietà for the Cappella del Re di Francia," in *"Il se rendit en Italie": Études offertes à André Chastel* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Elefante; Paris: Flammarion, 1987), 77–119, esp. 93; Lisa Pon, "Michelangelo's First Signature," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 15 (1996): 16–21; Livio Pestilli, "Michelangelo's Pietà: Lombard Critics and Plinian Sources," *Source* 19 (2000): 21–30; and Rudolf Preimesberger, "*Pittura Gobba:* Conjectures on Caravaggio's *Entombment,*" in *Paragons and Paragone: Van Eyck, Raphael, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Bernini* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 83–107. For Caravaggio's love-hate dialectic with Michelangelo, as evidenced in his paintings (which Preimesberger also discusses), see Hibbard, *Caravaggio,* esp. chap. 6, "Michelangelo Merisi and Michelangelo Buonarroti"; and Stone, "Self and Myth." In Stone, "Caravaggio's *Sleeping Cupid,*" I discuss the possibility that dell'Antella may have further spurred Caravaggio's rivalry with the famous sculptor and fostered the idea of Merisi as a "Michelangelo moderno." Whereas another seicento artist might seek to emulate Michelangelo Buonarroti 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 Malta may have been unable to decode the Lombard painter's sophisticated conceits and allusions in *The Beheading of Saint John* and the *Sleeping Cupid,* dell'Antella and his wide circle of Florentine friends on the island would have been more than capable. 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 dell'Antella's interest in poetry, see n. 32 above.

76. In Carlo Crivelli's witty *Madonna and Child* of about 1480 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), his *cartellino* is affixed with fictive little wax "droplets," one of which has already fallen off.

77. Philipp P. Fehl, "Dürer's Signatures: The Artist as Witness," *Continuum* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 3–34.

78. 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 *Opere e giorni: Studi su mille anni di arte europea,* ed. Klaus Bergdolt and Giorgio Bonsanti (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), 625–44.

79. Some famous examples of the old tradition are discussed in Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture,* chap. 4, "The Florentine Artist as Witness in Religious Narrative." More extreme even than Caravaggio, Rembrandt depicted himself as one of the participants responsible for killing Christ in his *Raising of the Cross* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich). See H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), esp. 15–24, 108–14.

80. 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 *novità* 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 primary 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 conundrum. The painter may have 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. It would be important, however, before 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, *Scrittura e popolo nella Roma barocca, 1585–1721,* exh. cat. (Rome: Quasar, 1982). Laurie Nussdorfer, "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, *Graffiti 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 "spells out the artist's name" and that "the blood describes his signature," terms that suggest a different (and more passive) conceit than the very physical and personal idea of graffiti I am claiming for Caravaggio's aggressive gesture.

81. The literature on Marino, who was a knight of the Ordine dei SS. Maurizio e Lazzaro, associated with the Savoy court at Turin, is now vast. The best introduction in English remains James V. Mirollo, *The Poet of the Marvelous Giambattista Marino* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963). See also Francesco Guardiani, ed., *The "Sense" of Marino: Literature, Fine Arts and Music of the Italian Baroque* (New York: Legas, 1994). For a recent study of *concettismo,* see Jon R. Snyder, *L'estetica del Barocco* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005).

82. A proposal for Caravaggio's portrait of Marino was recently made by Maurizio Marini, "Marino e Caravaggio: Un ritratto nel contesto della Contarelli," in *Caravaggio nel IV centenario della Cappella Contarelli, Atti del Convegno,* ed. Caterina Volpi (Rome: CAM Editrice, 2002), 233–42.

83. Above all, see the fundamental essay by Elizabeth Cropper, "The Petrifying Art: Marino's Poetry and Caravaggio," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 26 (1991): 193–212, to which this section of my study is much indebted. She observes that the signature in the Malta *Beheading* is "almost inconceivable without Marino's example" (207). See also idem, "Caravaggio and the Matter of Lyric," 47–56, and Anthony Colantuono, "Caravaggio's Literary Culture," 57–68, both in Warwick, *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion.* For an extensive discussion of Marino's concepts of *novità* in the context of numerous contentious rivalries, see Cropper, *The Domenichino Affair: Novelty, Imitation, and Theft in Seventeenth-Century Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), esp. chap. 4. For a recent case study, see Lorenzo Pericolo, "Caravaggio's *The Cardsharps* and Marino's 'Gioco di Primera': A Case of Intertextuality?" in *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 53 (2008): 129–52. As Cropper, "Petrifying Art," 193, notes, it was Luigi Salerno who first argued that Caravaggio's art, despite its stylistic differences, owed much to the culture of contemporary poetry. See Salerno, Duncan T. Kinkead, and William H. Wilson, "Poesia e simboli nel Caravaggio," *Palatino* 10 (1966): 106–17.

84. Cropper, "Petrifying Art," esp. 194.

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: Liviana, 1979), esp. vol. 1, xxv–xlv (citations below are from this latter text, which is based on the second edition of *La galeria* [Venice: Ciotti, 1620], which incorporated Marino's corrections to the faulty first edition). See also Carlo Caruso, "*La Galeria:* Questioni e proposte esegetiche," in *Marino e il Barocco, da Napoli a Parigi: Atti del convegno di Basilea, 7–9 giugno 2007,* ed. Emilio Russo (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2009), 185–207.

86. Rensselaer W. Lee, *"Ut Pictura Poesis": The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 3.

87. Hibbard, *Caravaggio,* 262; Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life,* 384–86; and Stone, "Self and Myth," 34–35.

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 Christ Child in a Forest,* now in the Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (see Rubin, "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. Petersburg; 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 Periti, "From Allegri to Laetus-Lieto: The Shaping of Correggio's Artistic 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, 50¾ 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. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), 187, cat. no. 3. In my opinion, the copy's style only reinforces the argument that the Borghese picture predates the Naples period.

90. See Keith Christiansen, entry to cat. no. 20, in *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi,* ed. Christiansen and Judith W. Mann, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 107–9.

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: "Davicte cholla 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. 3) is discussed in Cropper, "Petrifying Art," 207.

93. The poem is briefly mentioned in Gavriel Moses, " 'Care Gemelle d'un Parto Nate': Marino's *Picta Poesis,*" *MLN* 100, no. 1 (January 1985): 82–110, esp. 106.

94. Marino, *La galeria,* ed. Pieri, vol. 1, 17 ("Piramo e Tisbe del Fulminetto," poem 13 in "Favole"). The translations here and below are mine in collaboration 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: Gueriglii, 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'esecuzione" (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 execution cut off).

97. On the concept of authorial guilt, see Dennis Kezar, *Guilty Creatures: Renaissance Poetry and the Ethics of Authorship* (New York: Oxford University 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 tragedy—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 responsibility for it." Thomas Puttfarken, "Caravaggio's 'Story of St Matthew': A Challenge to the Conventions of Painting," *Art History* 21, no. 2 (June 1998): 163–81, unconvincingly argues that the man with Caravaggio'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 metaphor 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 nudity, to which Puttfarken objects, is also not uncommon for executioners (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.

98. Marino, *La galeria,* ed. Pieri, vol. 1, 56 ("La strage de' fanciulli innocenti di Guido Reni," poem 14 in "Historie").