WHEN LIFE TRIUMPHS

THE MEANINGS OF CHILD RESURRECTIONS IN SIMONE MARTINI'S BLESSED AGOSTINO NOVELLO ALTARPIECE

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ABSTRACT – *This essay discusses representations of death and resurrection of children in the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, painted by Simone Martini in 1324. In consideration of recent interdisciplinary studies that have demonstrated the affective agency of sacred paintings in medieval and early modern Europe, this paper examines the performative qualities of Martini's altarpiece, and determines how form and content were manipulated in order to evoke specific perceptions and behaviours in its viewers. Through its violent figurative language, naturalistic painting technique, and unusual subject matter, these disturbing representations of death stimulated a cathartic reaction and hence transformed reality for spectators. By eliciting emotional responses that ranged from shock to relief, the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece served as a didactic model for a wide audience of viewers.*

INTRODUCTION

> But there is something which spoils the sweetness of those moments and inflicts bitter concern: You who suffer to see them cry when they fall and hurt their hands, consider how painful it is to realize that it is at this age they die the most.[1]

The lives of children were fragile and tenuous in Italy during the fourteenth century, which resulted in a high infant mortality rate. This was caused first by the recurrent outbreaks of plague that, from 1348 on, devastated Italy for more than a century. Such a ´biological catastrophe´, in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's words, mostly struck children.[2] However, the 'Great Plague' was only one type of threat faced by children in early modern Italy; accidents and other diseases were also important factors in early deathdeath.[3] To understand the realities of childhood during the waning of the Middle Ages – to borrow the expression of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga – the common dangers they would have encountered in their daily lives must be closely examined. Among texts and images of the period, miracle stories offer a remarkably rich resource for understanding the vulnerability of children in fourteenth-century Tuscany.

The emergence and development of narratives of miraculous resurrections in painting is linked to fourteenth-century perceptions of the great mystery that was death. Paintings depicting events such as the resurrection of a child were most often *ex-votos*, devotional images offered to a sanctuary saint by someone who wanted his or her life or that of a relative to be spared. These images, as many scholars have mentioned, may have served an apotropaic or talismanic function for viewers.[4] The triumph of life over death, as realized in paint through the portrayal of a child's resurrection, may well have been a way to turn malevolence away and incur the saint's protection in real life.

Concerning the resurrection of children, the narrative pattern of hagiographical sources describing the life of a saint is relatively simple, and is recurrent in most of the available examples. The soon-to-be miraculously cured child is the victim of an accident, which prompts his entourage to mourn him and invoke the saint to whom the text or the altar is dedicated to perform a miracle and resurrect the child. The Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, painted by Simone Martini in Siena in 1324, is a unique example of this type of hagiographical image (Fig. 1). The altarpiece displays at its centre a portrait of Blessed Agostino, surrounded

1 Giovanni Battista Alberti, *I libri della Famiglia*, quoted by Eugenio Garin, "L'image de l'enfant dans les traités de pédagogie du XVe siècle, in *Histoire de l'enfance en Occident-I. De l'Antiquité au XVIIe siècle*, ed. Becchi Egle and Julia Dominique (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 248.

2 Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "L'enfant, la mémoire et la mort dans l'Italie des XIVe et XVe siècles," in *Histoire de l'enfance en Occident – Tome I: De l'Antiquité au XVIIe siècle*, Becchi Egle and Julia Dominique (ed.) (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 228.

3 See Jennifer Lawler, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, 2001), 33.

4 See Efrat El-hanany, *Beating the Devil: Images of the Madonna del Soccorso in Italian Renaissance Art* (PhD Dissertation: Indiana University, 2006), 129; and Micheal E. Goodich, *Violence and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 3.

Fig. 1
Panel of the Blessed Agostino Novello: the Saint Inspired by an Angel and Four of His Miracles
Simone Martini
1324
Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale

Fig. 2
Detail of the first *predella* of *Panel of the Blessed Agostino Novello: the Saint Inspired by an Angel and Four of His Miracles*
Simone Martini
1324
Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale

by four *predellas* representing posthumously executed miracles. Three of these miracle scenes involve children, which are the primary focus of this study. The first scene depicts a child being attacked by a wolf at the doors of a medieval city resembling Siena and other Tuscan towns from this period (Fig. 2). The second panel portrays the fall of a young boy from the balcony of an urban dwelling (Fig. 3). The third panel – the only one to represent an adult – conveys the death of a knight. The final miracle scene depicts a swaddled baby, brought back to life by the saint after being flung headfirst from a swinging cradle (Fig. 4). In each panel, the child's resurrection is conveyed as following the accident, on account of the presence and intervention of Agostino Novello.

Although the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece is not the first painting to portray miracles involving children, it is unusual for its high proportion of child-related miracles – three-quarters of the altarpiece is dedicated to this theme

5 Andrew Martindale, "The Child in the Picture: A Medieval Perspective," in *The Church and Childhood: Papers Read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and the 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History*

Fig. 3
Simone Martini
Detail of the second *predella* of *Panel of the Blessed Agostino Novello: the Saint Inspired by an Angel and Four of His Miracles*
1324
Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale
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Fig. 4
Simone Martini
Detail of the fourth *predella* of *Panel of the Blessed Agostino Novello: the Saint Inspired by an Angel and Four of His Miracles*
1324
Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale
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– and for its violent portrayal of death. The current investigation of these two characteristics of the altarpiece moves beyond previous studies – focused mainly on the painting's historical context and naturalism – by emphasizing its affective impact instead.[5] Art historians and anthropologists have demonstrated the significance of the reciprocal relationship between art object and viewer during this period.[6] The aim of this study is to consider the relatively recent assertion that artworks, and especially sacred works, functioned performatively.[7] Hence, it seeks to establish the reflexive process of viewing that the Agostino Novello Altarpiece negotiated with viewers in fourteenth-century Siena,[8] by examining the pictorial qualities and the spatial setting of the painting.

Serving more than a solely devotional purpose, Martini's altarpiece also operated as a didactic aid for spectators with regard to the care and safety of children. In order to demonstrate this crucial ulterior function, it is necessary to consider first the importance of the historical figure of Agostino Novello for the fourteenth-century Sienese community. Once Agostino Novello's significant role has been ascertained, I will discuss the figurative violence of these images and the unique manner in which Simone Martini depicted the scenes. Finally, I will investigate how these images prompted a cathartic experience through their shocking imagery and disturbing naturalism. In a region and period that experienced premature death all too frequently, the acute and varied emotional responses evoked in viewers while looking at the altarpiece transformed their reality, inciting them to act more attentively and protectively towards children.

AGOSTINO NOVELLO: 'CIVIS NOSTER'

The Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece was little known before its restoration in 1945-1946, but has become one of Simone Martini's most analyzed works ever since. Despite the considerable interest in this painting, its violent portrayal of children's deaths and the significance of its aesthetic qualities have never been appropriately addressed. In order to properly consider these aspects and

Society, Diana Wood ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 197-232. Cathleen Sara Hoeniger, "The Child Miracles in Simone Martini's Beato Agostino Novello Altarpiece," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 65* (2002): 303-324. Marie-France Morel, "Le temps de tous les dangers: petite enfance et accidents d'après les ex-voto (XVIe-XIXe siècles)," in *Naissance, Enfance et Éducation dans la France méridionale du XVIe au XXe siècle. Hommage à Mireille Laget: actes du colloque des 15 et 16 mars 1996* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry III, 2000), 143-192.

6 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

7 Caroline van Eck, "Living Statues: Alfred Gell's Art and Agency, Living Presence Response and the Sublime," in *Art History* 33/4 (2010), 644. According to Van Eck, Gell examines agency without appropriately considering how agency and viewer's responses developed or changed over a period of time.

8 Van Eck, "Living Statues," 648.

determine their influence on audiences, it is necessary to discuss the painting's historical background first.

Max Seidel, in his foundational study of 1985, established that the planned location for the Blessed Agostino's tomb was the Church of Saint Augustine in Siena, where his remains were re-interred after having been buried initially at the hermitage of San Leonardo al Lago, situated just outside the city.[9] Although there is no documentation for the commission of the altarpiece, the painting was probably intended to invigorate the cult of Agostino Novello and to encourage the initiation of beatification and canonization procedures. Nevertheless, devotion towards this figure would remain localized, since it was only in the eighteenth century that Agostino Novello was beatified and his cult recognized by papal authorities.

Agostino Novello, who was born in Sicily and did not settle in Tuscany until the very end of his life, was an unusual choice as a spiritual mediator. Living outside the Siena city walls in a hermitage in San Leonardo al Lago, and thus not in direct contact with the citizens of the city, Agostino differed from the religious figures typically promoted by religious orders in the region, such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Servites, and Carmelites.[10] This could explain the choice of location for the altarpiece, as it would have been much more difficult to promote the cult of a new saint from the secluded location of San Leonardo al Lago. The cult, moreover, would have needed political legitimation for its activities, which could only be accomplished through an annual procession of the municipal authorities to Agostino's tomb. Transferring his remains to the Church of Saint Augustine, within Siena, would have facilitated this process, while also introducing the cult to the local populace.[11] The sepulchral complex and altarpiece that decorated the tomb, therefore, were measures designed to further cultivate the veneration of Agostino Novello. These needed to be accessible to encourage visitation and pilgrimage, and to elicit prayer and contemplation of Agostino's interment.[12] Given the wide audience that likely interacted with the altarpiece, the choice of subject matter for the *predellas* and their visual language deserve further investigation.

9 Max Seidel, "Condizionamento iconografico e scelta semantica: Simone Martini e la tavola del Beato Agostino Novello," in *Simone Martini: atti del convegno*, ed.Luciano Bellosi (Firenze: Centro Di, 1988).

10 Seidel, "Condizionamento iconografico e scelta semantica," 75. Hoeniger, "The Child Miracles," 307.

11 Seidel, "Condizionamento iconografico e scelta semantica," 75.

12 Most of the surviving descriptions of the sepulchral complex insist on the presence of the altarpiece in the church, which indicates its importance and visibility. See Seidel, "Condizionamento iconografico e scelta semantica," 76, and Martindale, *Simone Martini*, 213.

There are two primary sources for the life and miracles of the Blessed Agostino Novello, which were discovered by Andrew Martindale in 1988. The first is a vita likely written at the convent of Saint Augustine in Siena, while the second was completed by an anonymous Florentine between 1326 and 1342.[13] Intriguingly, these two accounts set forth two completely different series of miracles, totalling eleven miracles in all. The Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece depicts one miracle from each source, including the miracle of the cradle from the Sienese *vita* and the miracle of the balcony from the Florentine account. The other two *predellas*, which portray a child being attacked by a wolf and a knight falling to his death from a mountain, have not yet been linked to any literary source.

The selection of these miracles, in particular the emphasis on resurrections of children, is unusual, given that the majority of Agostino Novello's recorded miracles did not concern children. Moreover, the miracles chosen were performed by Agostino posthumously, which is an unexpected element, since it had become common by the fourteenth century to underscore the earthly life and human qualities of a saint. The altarpiece therefore must be understood as a product of his cult, since Agostino Novello died in 1309, less than thirty years before Simone Martini began the painting. Without surviving documentation, an examination of the content of the *predellas* and what Seidel has described as Martini's 'vigorous figurative language' may provide insight into why patrons chose to promote the cult of Agostino Novello in such a unique way.[14]

REPRESENTING DEATH: NATURALISM AND VIOLENCE IN DOMESTIC SCENES

Death as a subject of representation was not especially rare in fourteenth-century Italy; however, typically it was only alluded to through allegory. Martini, on the other hand, represented the actual moment of death with all of its violence and brutality, in order to enhance the 'thaumaturgical' or miracle-inducing power of the images. According to this logic, the more violent the child's death, the more viewers were shocked by what they saw, thus rendering the resurrection

13 Martindale, *Simone Martini,* 212.

14 Seidel, "Condizionamento iconografico e scelta semantica," 78.

even more miraculous. Many art historians have overlooked this aspect of the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, focusing instead on the artist's great skill in realistically depicting the environment of the fourteenth century.[15] Although this is indeed an important characteristic of Tuscan painting from this period, the naturalism must be considered as the first stage in the experience of viewing and interacting with such images. Historian Michel Vovelle underlines the layered meanings evoked by *ex-voto* paintings through the accurate rendition of the domestic and the familiar:

> Behind the apparent simplicity of its message – a gesture of thanks for a granted wish – the *ex-voto* is charged with multiple meanings. At a first level it represents an outstanding testimony concerning the material civilization of a precise period […]. Quite indiscreetly, as well, it offers, if not the secrets of family life, a glimpse of its composition, and even more interestingly the place attributed to each member of the family […].[16]

A sense of recognition in fourteenth-century paintings was therefore crucial to creating and conveying meaning. Locations, figures, and objects needed to be both familiar to viewers, and made tangible through naturalistic painting techniques. In the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, Martini uses the visual vocabulary typical of ex-votos from this period, representing the type of urban culture that Tuscany, and more particularly cities such as Florence or Siena, wished to embrace. The facades and interior spaces of buildings, for example, are consistent with the architecture of Tuscan cities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In their precision and in the repetition of widely recognized motifs, the accidents depicted further enhanced their familiarity. The meticulous portrayal of the cradle in the fourth panel, or of the balcony slat breaking off in the second scene, are elements that would have heightened a sense of recognition in the viewer. Moreover, certain motifs, which were prevalent in both texts and images of this period, would have been understood as archetypes for childhood accidents. The

15 Diana Norman, *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 7-8.

16 Michel Vovelle, preface to Bernard Cousin, *Le Miracle et le quotidien: les ex-voto provençaux, images d'une société* (Aix-en-Provence: Sociétés, mentalités, cultures, 1983), 8. [Translation by the author]

last *predella*, for example, portrays a wet nurse, a very familiar figure in Sienese culture and a typical member of wealthy households. Here the wet nurse has pushed the cradle too hard, causing her helpless charge to fall and perish. Her task was not only to tend to the child, but also to ensure its safety. The mistrust of the wet nurse conveyed here is encountered frequently during this epoch. Many pedagogues insisted on the limited trust families should place in such women, who – not being the natural mothers – were often inept at caring for the children in their charge. Francesco da Barberino, for instance, in his treatise *Il Reggimento e costumi di donna* (1348), urged contemporary wet nurses to be especially vigilant with children as they began to walk, so as to keep them away from heights and to prevent them from falling.[17]

Falling was another frequently deployed pictorial device used to denote a childhood mishap. The fall from the balcony in the second *predella* corresponds to the infant's fall in the scene of the wet nurse, although here the antagonist is the actual mother. The panel was undoubtedly inspired by a fresco executed between 1300 and 1310 by the workshop of Giotto di Bondone,[18] and the same motif returns almost unchanged in the background of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Miracle of the Boy*, painted in 1485 in Santa Trinità in Florence (Fig. 5). Finally, the attack by an animal in the first panel of the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece can be seen again – although the wolf has become a horse – in Benozzo Gozzoli's *Saint Dominic Resuscitates Napoleone Orsini* of 1461.[19] The wolf or horse was meant to indicate the child's vulnerability in the presence of animals, domesticated or wild.[20]

Other aspects of the *predellas* were intended to conjure feelings of empathy and parental compassion. The detailed evocation of an Italian city, which occurred only in the three scenes with children, was one of several techniques to encourage engagement with the imagery. Seidel underlines how Martini chose the most suitable visual language to emotionally and spiritually touch the believer who approached the altarpiece seeking help and protection.[21] In the Blessed Agostino

17 See David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch Zuber, *Les Toscans et leur famille – Une étude du Catasto Florentin de 1427* (Paris: Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1978), 559.

18 Workshop of Giotto di Bondone, *A Child of Casa Sperelli Falling from a Tower*, Fresco, c. 1300, Assisi, Lower Church of San Francesco, North Transept.

19 Benozzo Gozzoli, *Saint Dominic Reuscitates Napoleone Orsini*, 1461, Tempera on panel, 25 x 35 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

20 "Make him flee the presence of horses and dogs, and other animals, and prevent him from giving bread to dogs or roosters". Francesco da Barberino, *Il Reggimento e costumi di donna* (Roma: Stamperia de Romanis, 1815), 267.

21 Seidel, "Condizionamento iconografico e scelta semantica," 77.

Novello Altarpiece, this effect is achieved through the violence with which the accidents are represented. As mentioned, in Italian medieval and Renaissance painting a dead child was never painted as such. Instead, death was only suggested through allegory or in a manner that facilitated ambiguity as to the child's condition. Putting aside representations of falls, which are essentially non-violent since the viewers do not see the child actually colliding with the ground, miracle scenes provide the only iconographic format for depicting children's deaths. The Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece draws from this pictorial tradition; however, it moves beyond established precedent in its exaggerated violence and considerable use of blood. This almost macabre zeal for painting blood can be understood as responding to the theory of 'humours' predominant in Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which was first developed by

22 See Georges Vigarello, *Le corps redressé: histoire d'un pouvoir pédagogique* (Paris: A. Colin, 2001), 13.

23 The artists were inspired by accidents incurred by the children who surrounded them. Martini used here another kind of accident to visually create this one. Indeed, the child is copiously bleeding, but his empty eye-socket is also very visible. This image recalls also accidents due to birds, usually

Fig. 5
Miracle of the Boy
Domenico Ghirlandaio
1485
Florence, Santa Trinità

Claudius Galenus in the second century CE. According to Galenus' theory, blood, warm and wet, corresponded with the temperament of children, who have a sanguine constitution, fragile and imperfect, and who therefore must be protected at all times. In the scenes of the bloodiest accidents involving the wolf and the wet nurse, Martini has haemorrhagic effusions erupt from the heads of the victims with disturbing precision.[22]

In the miracle scene of the wolf attack, the child's head bleeds copiously and has even lost an eye.[23] In the fourth panel the infant, forced out of his cradle by the careless wet nurse, also bleeds profusely, and a pool of blood surrounds his body. This is even more significant, since it deviates from the narrative of the miracle. As Martindale has explained, the baby's head was deformed by the fall and his aunt, before begging for Agostino Novello to intercede, tried to reshape it "as if it were made of wax".[24] Martini transforms the accident and renders it more dramatic through the stream of blood that flows from the head of the lifeless infant. Later works produced in Tuscany similarly present death as a bloody and gruesome event. Domenico Veneziano, in his *A Miracle of St. Zenobius* (1442), also depicts death with painstaking precision as a haemorrhagic effusion from the head (Fig. 6).[25] Benozzo Gozzoli as well seems to have had a particular inclination to picture death with an utmost sense of agony. In the *Resurrection of a Dead Child by Saint Zenobius* (1461), the face of the child is mutilated and blood is seeping out from under his body.[26] In Gozzoli's aforementioned *Resurrection of*

Fig. 6
A Miracle of St. Zenobius
Domenico Veneziano
c. 1442
© 2013. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge Photo Scala, Florence

chickens and roosters that came into houses and pecked the faces of children left unwatched. A blinded or eyeless socket was the most frequent result of these attacks. See Morel, "Le temps de tous les dangers," 197-198.

24 See Martindale, "The Child in the Picture", 199.

25 See Hoeniger, "The Child Miracles", 310.

26 Benozzo Gozzoli, *Saint Zenobius Resurrecting a Child,* 1461, Tempera on panel, Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Napoleone Orsini the child is portrayed lying lifeless on the ground, while the horse threatens to trample his body and head. Once again, the profusion of blood is intentionally disturbing.

The violence of the accident was also stressed through the reactions of the adults depicted. Women scream in Veneziano's *St. Zenobius*, and beg the saint to bring the child back to life. In other examples, parents repeatedly touch the child to assert his or her corporeal presence. These gestures are traditional rhetorical expressions for bereavement and it is not rare to see them when figures, most often women, encounter death.[27] Returning to the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, it was again Seidel who first discussed the painting's violence: "Neither the Sienese painting of previous ages nor the previous works of Simone Martini offer examples of a more dramatic cruelty that could stand comparison with the altarpiece".[28] According to Seidel, this gruesomeness was intended above all to highlight the miraculous efficacy of Agostino. The fact that he appears in each panel to perform the miracle himself strongly indicates the importance of his supernatural intervention through resurrection: without it, the child would not have survived. Nevertheless, such visual carnage was quite uncommon in fourteenth-century Italian painting. If it was meant only to reinforce the power of a saint, then it is likely that other painters would have used similar techniques. Still, the altarpiece's singularity suggests that such violent visual language may have served another purpose.

LEARNING FROM DEATH: A VISUAL CATHARSIS WITH EDUCATIVE PROPERTIES

Why did Simone Martini insist on such an unusual representation of children's deaths? After all, the presence of a wolf or a body lying on the ground would have been enough to convey death to the viewer. Since it is unknown who commissioned the painting, it is unclear whether the altarpiece had an instructive intent or reflected a personal loss experienced by the patron(s). A desire to celebrate the saint as well as the patrons and their families regularly presided

27 Moshe Barasch, *Gesture of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art* (New-York: New York University Press 1976), 60.

28 Seidel, "Condizionamento iconografico e scelta semantica", 77.

over contemporary commissions, however, as is the case with Ghirlandaio's fresco in Santa Trinità (Fig. 5). Although Ghirlandaio also deploys naturalism to depict death – he represents the boy falling from the balcony after having tried to retrieve his ball with great precision – the central part of the fresco is dedicated to the actual act of resurrection by Saint Francis, who is placed in the foreground above the entire Florentine community. The minor characters, like the accident relegated to the the background and including members of the patron's family, surround the child and, by their presence and prayers, participate in the miraculous event. In this fresco, any act of violence is marginalized in order to focus attention on the celebration of Saint Francis and on the patrons as intercessors. However, this analysis cannot be applied to the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, since the *predellas* do not contain any portraits and therefore the emphasis is placed entirely on the accidents and their causes and effects. According to Andrew Martindale, the specificity of the miracles in Martini's altarpiece likely corresponds to a personal preference of the patron – whether a private individual or the city of Siena – for representations of children.[29] A similar commission that may illuminate the purpose of the altarpiece is Veneziano's *A Miracle of St. Zenobius*. Commissioned by the Uzzano family for their family church in Santa Lucia dei Magnoli, Florence, the altarpiece was intended for private display and probably commemorated a personal tragedy suffered by the Uzzano family.

The strangely violent narratives of such paintings were thus meant to communicate with a particular audience. In the case of the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, the impact of its representations derives from the identification of the spectator with the painting's imagery. The meaning of the excessive insistence on blood and corpses can be explained by the fortunate outcome of resurrection in the narratives. Indeed, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, parents who witnessed such disturbing scenes in real life must have felt a strong empathy towards their painted counterparts. Writing in 1587, Giovanni Battista Armenini elucidates how these paintings could have affected their viewers:

29 Martindale also advances the hypothesis that the multiplication of children's resurrections could be "a characteristic of the period", in light of the very high infant mortality rate in the fourteenth century. See Martindale, *Simone Martini,* 212, note 6.

> Since the eye is the most perfect among the exterior senses, it moves the minds to hatred, love and fear, more than all the other senses […] and when the beholders see very grave tortures present and apparently real […] they are moved to true piety and thereby drawn to devotion and reverence […].[30]

Although Armenini's text dates from the sixteenth century, it indicates how certain sacred images, by their visual language, could affect viewers by appealing to their emotions. Throughout this period, Italy was burdened with high death rates, especially among children. Klapisch-Zuber, in her research on children in Tuscan cities, provides a thought-provoking statistical study on children born in Florence between 1300 and 1550. It reveals that during this period, about 20% of children died before reaching the age of three – when they left their wet nurse. A further 30% died before the age of ten, and 34% before reaching adolescence, in this period the age of fifteen.[31] These numbers are comparable to other cities on the Italian peninsula. Considering the infant mortality risks that plagued Italy for almost three centuries, it is very likely that representations of children's accidents would have reminded viewers of their own experiences with premature death, whether the child who died was their own or a close relative's.

Viewing the *predellas* of the Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece, moreover, was a cathartic experience for its audience. The lesson of the deeply moving images, however, could not be devoid of hope, which would have resulted in apathetic despondency among viewers. For this reason, Martini coupled each horrific scene of death to one of resurrection. By presenting the moments of death and of miraculous resuscitation performed by Agostino Novello on the same panel, the audience was led through the entire emotional experience of these two extremes. This cathartic process is how the didactic message of the altarpiece was communicated; the conflicting and contradictory feelings associated with life and death provoked parents to thoroughly reflect upon their own roles, behaviours, and actions. Without the inclusion of resurrection in the scenes, viewers would

30 Giovanni Battista Armenini, *De'veri precetti della pittura* (Ravenna, 1587), 34, quoted and translated by Freedberg, *The Power of images*, 2.

31 Klapisch-Zuber, "L'enfant, la mémoire et la mort," 226.

have only encountered fear and would not have picked up on the immediate relevance of the accidents portrayed.

According to Cathleen Sara Hoeniger, such a horrific portrayal of death was the result of an Augustinian desire to encourage not only a sense of responsibility but also of guilt.[32] This is why Martini highlights the lack of attention by adults in the *predellas* depicting falls. In each instance, it was the adult's fault that the child was killed, whether through the negligence of a mother or the carelessness of a wet nurse. The culpability of adults is especially emphasized in the scene of the boy falling from a balcony, in which the child, after having been saved by Agostino Novello, frowns in anger and resentment at his mother, brandishing his fist. This singular gesture was painted for a precise purpose: to indicate that the accident was not the work of fortune, but was the result of the mother's lack of action. The opposition between mother and son stresses the disparity between the mother's negligence and the attentiveness of the men of the family[33]: the mother, stunned by the incident, is alone in the upper register of the painting, whereas in the lower part, the child is surrounded by the masculine members of the family. In the fourth *predella* the same distinction is made, as the wet nurse, who caused her helpless charge to be thrown to its death by pushing the cradle too hard, is conspicuously absent from the procession in the lower part of the painting. The image clearly establishes that, even though Agostino Novello brought the infant back to life, the wet nurse permanently lost her place in the family. Seeing such images may have encouraged wet nurses to be more conscientious, and motivated mothers to take better care of their own children.

Finally, these paintings could have had a didactic purpose for children themselves. We can easily establish a parallel between the resurrection scenes and Francesco da Barberino's prescription for the edification of children. According to Barberino, it was beneficial to impart in a developing child a fear of potential threats, such as accidental falls, animals, sharp objects, and even the dark: "And instil in him the fear of going in the dark, of touching the flames with his hands."[34] These dangers

32 Hoeniger, "The Child Miracles," 326.

33 This masculine group, not mentioned in the story, is an addition by the painter. See Martindale, *Simone Martini,* 212.

34 Francesco da Barberino, *Il reggimento e costume di donna*, 266. See also Herlihy and Klapisch Zuber, *Les Toscans et leur famille*, 559.

are realized in scenes such as Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Miracle of Saint Nicholas of Bari* (1330), in which the young son of a merchant wanders off and falls into a trap the devil has laid for him.[35] While the whole family is absorbed by the celebrations of a banquet, the child sneaks away and before anyone has noticed his disappearance, the Devil, disguised as a pilgrim, strangles him.[36]

CONCLUSION

The Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece scenes had an important performative role for contemporary viewers. Although the altarpiece was intended in part to encourage the growth of the cult of the Blessed Agostino Novello in the city of Siena, it reached a wide audience due to its location and accessibility in the Church of Sant'Agostino. Moreover, its figurative language and subject matter were virtually unprecedented in the pictorial tradition of fourteenth-century Italy. The violence and insistence on blood were unique among miracle narratives from this period, indicating that the altarpiece was meant do to more than merely underscore the miraculous powers of Agostino Novello. The purpose of the portrayed violence was to enhance the affective impact of the altarpiece, in order to trigger a cathartic response and render its didactic message more palpable. The didactic aims of the altarpiece are paralleled in pedagogical literature concerning the care of children of the period.

These images were performative in that they had the power to alter the behaviours of their audience and even prevent future accidents. This process was not magical, even though these images had an apotropaic dimension: the altarpiece was imbued with a didactic agency, impressed upon its audience through the compelling combination of violent incidents and redemptive resurrections. The message could only be effective if the images first shocked the viewers, and then immediately soothed them. In this way, the paintings acted affectively through visual catharsis. The pairing of life lost and life regained within the same panel forced viewers to encounter the death of a child without the infliction of emotional pain.

35 Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Four Stories from the Life of St. Nicholas*, c. 1330, Tempera on panel, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

36 Once again, note the very realistic – and shocking – representation of the strangulation: the child is held in the air, struggling to loosen the devil's hold, and we can even feel his feet writhing in pain.

Miracle stories thus offer a glimpse into children's lives in the Late Middle Ages and of the dangers they regularly faced. Such narratives, moreover, convey a manifest concern for children and the deep distress invoked upon endangerment. Contrary to what Philippe Ariès has claimed, it was impossible to become accustomed to infant mortality, even though its high levels made it a daily occurrence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[37] The Blessed Agostino Novello Altarpiece provides evidence of the pain inflicted on a community when a child died, proving that although such death was frequent, it was never considered normal.

37 Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien régime* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), 250.

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