

# RECORDING MIRACLES IN RENAISSANCE ITALY\*

## I

If you take the train from Naples around the northern rim of Mount Vesuvius, you will arrive at Madonna dell'Arco, on the edge of the town of Sant'Anastasia. The station takes its name from the large and rather grandiose whitewashed sanctuary that dominates the neighbourhood. With its generic belfry and copper-green cupola, the church building, begun in 1593 and much extended in the twentieth century, is nothing to write home about architecturally. But its bulky presence is a good starting point for thinking about the concrete means by which communities seek to record miraculous events.

According to tradition, on Easter Monday 1450 a local lad was playing the ball game pall-mall with his friends when — in a fit of irritation — he threw the ball at a painting of the Madonna that had been placed within an arch (hence 'Madonna dell'Arco'). This act of sacrilege ignited a trio of miracles: firstly, the Virgin's face bled and secondly, the boy found himself rooted to the ground and unable to flee. The third miracle related to the punishment of the boy. When news reached the Count of Sarno, who held judicial authority over the region, he reacted quickly by condemning the accused to be hanged from the lime tree next to the Madonna. Two hours later, following the death of the intemperate youth, the tree dramatically withered — an event that was perceived as lending sacred force to the secular justice of the hanging. These were the first of thousands of miracles that subsequently occurred thanks to the intervention of the Madonna dell'Arco and which, to this day, are documented in a variety of media at the church and adjacent study centre.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the early history of Madonna dell'Arco, see Antonio Ermanno Giardino and Michele Rak (eds.), *Per Grazia Ricevuta: Le tavolette dipinte ex-voto per la Madonna dell'Arco* (Pompeii, 1983), 7–10.

In common with numerous other shrines across the Catholic world, the primary record of the image's miraculous tradition may be said to be the sanctuary church itself.<sup>2</sup> But the cluster of buildings at the site, designed to welcome pilgrims and other devotees, also serve as archives of visual and material records that attest to the miracles brought about by the image of the Virgin Mary. Upon entering the church, the most conspicuous of these are the painted wooden tablets that line the walls of the church like scales. Hundreds of these boards, oriented in landscape and normally measuring twenty to thirty centimetres across, depict graces brought about by the Madonna. Some are roughly grouped according to theme, for example shipwrecks, overturned carriages, domestic scenes of families gathered around the sickbed and (a more recent genre) hospital emergencies. There is scant regard for chronology, although in a minority of cases the images are dated and the beneficiary of the miracle is named. More often, the picture is left to speak for itself. In the corridors behind the High Altar, more wall-space is devoted to other kinds of material record. Mass-produced anatomical models made of metal represent the feet, the hands, the hearts, the breasts et cetera of those who have been healed at the shrine. These images are interspersed with small-scale reliefs of whole people, men, women, children and babies, also serially produced and without personal features. Yet another section of wall displays a collage of crutches and leg-irons. Meanwhile, in the museum that forms part of the sanctuary's study centre, prominence is given to rare, valuable and curious records of miracles — gifts of gratitude to the Madonna for her graces. These include precious jewels, porcelain, Olympic medals, thick plaits of hair, golden syringes that document habits kicked, and knives and guns that commemorate the moral conversion of former participants in organized crime (this is Naples, after all).

These myriad objects and images are all known as 'ex-votos', a Latin expression meaning 'from a vow'. The logic of that phrase refers to the contract made between devotee and saint (or deity) at a time of crisis. The supplicant beseeches the saint — in this case the Madonna dell'Arco — to help them in their hour of need and promises ('vows') to make a gift to the saint if their request is granted. The offering may take many forms, for example a donation of cash or grain or a pilgrimage or other special

<sup>2</sup> On the architecture of churches associated with miracles, see Paul Davies, 'S. Maria delle Carceri in Prato and Italian Renaissance Pilgrimage Architecture', *Architectural History*, xxxvi (1993); Andrew Hopkins, *Santa Maria Della Salute: Architecture and Ceremony in Baroque Venice* (Cambridge, 2000); and Paul Davies, Deborah Howard, and Wendy Pullan (eds.), *The Architecture of Pilgrimage 1000–1500: Southern Europe and Beyond* (Farnham, 2013).

devotion. However, the appeal of votive objects that visually represent the healed body has proved enduring over many centuries and is by no means restricted to the Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup> In the ancient world, it was common to leave anatomical models at healing sanctuaries and other religious sites as offerings to the gods.<sup>4</sup> From the medieval period to the present day, the production of wax models representing parts of the body has proved especially popular.<sup>5</sup>

While a clear line of succession may be drawn between the bronze and earthenware body-parts left at pre-Christian shrines and the votive models that adorn Catholic sanctuaries today, the prized collection of painted tablets at Madonna dell'Arco arises from a more culturally specific development. For these simple yet descriptive images, executed on wooden boards, first came into common use in Italy during the 1490s. While their sudden appearance in shrines across the Italian peninsula still requires explanation, several plausible contexts have been suggested. Firstly, they may be considered as a visual offshoot from the predella panels that became popular from the fourteenth century: small-scale images, situated around or at the base of an altarpiece, in which scenes from the life of Christ or of the saints were illustrated.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, their emergence may be linked to the popularization of portraiture and the representation of donors in religious art. A third context for this new visual genre is the rise of print. During the period 1475–1600, the publication of hundreds of miracle-books propagated a repertoire of narratives on which painted ex-votos might feed. Fourthly and more generally, as Fredrika Jacobs has remarked, we can see the popularity of votive tablets as arising from 'the laicisation of religion' and in

<sup>3</sup> On the transhistorical nature of ex-votos, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ex-voto: image, organe, temps* (Paris, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> On Greek and Roman anatomical votives, see the articles in *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*, i (Los Angeles, 2004): B. Forsén 'Dedications: Gr. 2d, 10, Model Body Parts', 311–13; and J. M. Turfa, 'Weihgeschenke: Altitalien und Imperium Romanum, 1. Italien. B. Anatomical Votives', 359–68. Also, E.-J. Graham and J. Draycott (eds.), *Bodies of Evidence: Re-defining Approaches to the Anatomical Votive* (Farnham, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> On the appeal of wax votives, see David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago, 1989), 157; Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Wax Flesh, Vicious Cycles', in Monika v. Düring *et al.* (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Anatomica* (Cologne, 1999), 70–1; Roberta Panzanelli, 'Compelling Presence: Wax Effigies in Renaissance Florence', in Roberta Panzanelli (ed.), *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles, 2008); and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality* (New York, 2011), 153.

<sup>6</sup> A. Ciarocchi and E. Mori, *Le tavolette votive italiane* (Udine, 1960), 9–10.

particular the growth of Marian piety, which were conspicuous trends in fifteenth-century Italy.<sup>7</sup>

The Madonna dell'Arco houses the largest though not the oldest collection of painted ex-votos in Italy. Here, over seven thousand tablets are preserved, most of them stored in the study centre. Although the numbers are boosted by a very substantial presence of modern votive tablets, the survival rate from the early modern period remains impressive. Nearly eight hundred are thought to have been produced before 1600, the great majority of which date from the 1590s. Other shrines in Central and Northern Italy preserve votive tablets from the first period of their production, the most significant early collections surviving in Viterbo (Lazio), Tolentino (Marche), Cesena (Emilia-Romagna) and Lonigo (Veneto). Votive tablets are notoriously hard to date, owing to long-term degradation, successive efforts at restoration, iconographic and stylistic continuity and very patchy documentation. However, realistic estimates place the number of extant painted ex-votos from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries at more than fifteen hundred.<sup>8</sup> Given the poor conditions in which the tablets have often been maintained and the poor quality of the materials with which they were first made, and taking into account descriptive evidence from the period, it is clear that what survives is but a small proportion of what once existed.

In this essay, I investigate the ways in which votive offerings functioned as historical records.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Virginia Reinburg has referred to French Books of Hours as creating 'archives of prayer', I suggest that ex-votos constituted 'archives of miracles'; in both cases, we see the urge of early modern communities to preserve and document the intangible with intensely material records.<sup>10</sup> In the context of ex-votos, the term 'archives' has a double resonance in relation both to shrines as repositories and to the collections of material records that they housed. Moreover, these archives of miracles are not finite but continue to accumulate records to the present day. My focus is on how

<sup>7</sup> Important recent contributions to the scholarship on Italian Renaissance ex-votos include Fredrika Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy* (New York, 2013), esp. 66–79 on the rise of votive tablets; Megan Holmes, 'Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult', in Michael W. Cole and Rebecca Zorach (eds.), *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World* (Aldershot, 2009); Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven, CT, 2013); Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy, from the Renaissance to the Present* (London, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy*, also emphasizes the role of painted ex-votos as records; see esp. 37–40 and 98.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Reinburg, *French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayer, c.1400–1600* (Cambridge, 2012).

individuals, institutions and communities created, maintained and drew upon these archives of votive evidence during the Renaissance. The parallels that exist between archives of documents and archives of things prompt questions about the status of visual and material evidence in the early modern period and about its relationship with text. Indeed, the coincidence of the rise of votive tablets in the final decade of the fifteenth century with the rise of print draws attention to the interplay between visual and verbal strategies for recording and publicizing miracles in the Italian Renaissance. The printed miracle compilations that abounded during this period drew authority from various kinds of written evidence, including notarized records and legal documents. Crucially, they also depended for their stories on the painted ex-votos accumulated on the church walls.

## II

The current discussion begins with three shrines from the south, centre and north of Italy where curators and art historians have established with some confidence the number of votive tablets pre-dating 1600. These are Madonna dell'Arco (c.784 tablets); Tolentino (c.134) and Lonigo (c.150).<sup>11</sup> While the shrines of Madonna dell'Arco and Lonigo are both dedicated to miraculous images of the Virgin Mary, Tolentino honours a male saint, St Nicholas, an Augustinian friar who died in 1305 and was canonized in 1446. For early modern historians, the ex-votos preserved at these shrines might be taken to represent an extraordinary archive, largely neglected thanks to our professional tendency to privilege word over image. They are an enticing source because they appear to offer visual depictions of ordinary occurrences involving ordinary people. They speak to us, for example, of the horror and poignancy of infant illness and injury, of the fears generated by factional violence and wrongful accusation, of the predictable yet traumatic life-cycle events of birth, sickness, and death and of life's less predictable calamities, including natural disasters and every kind of accident.

Three votive tablets, one from each of our three shrines, will serve to illustrate the nature of the evidence on offer in the pictorial ex-voto (Plates 1–3). The first image depicts a little boy, who has been wounded in the neck by a large

<sup>11</sup> On Madonna dell'Arco, see Giardino and Rak (eds.), *Per Grazia Ricevuta*; on Tolentino, Annalisa Gatta et al. (eds.), *Per Grazia Ricevuta: Gli ex-voto di San Nicola a Tolentino* (Tolentino, 2005); on Lonigo, A. Lora et al. (eds.), *Le tavolette votive della Madonna dei Miracoli di Lonigo: Catalogo e ricerche* (Lonigo, 2005). Note that the datings at Lonigo are more tentative than at the other two shrines, and are often listed by the curators as being 'sixteenth- or seventeenth-century': the number of 150 pre-1600 ex-votos is my conservative estimate.

pair of scissors (see Plate 1). It records not only the event but also the emotional responses that were triggered by the moment of crisis. Here, the child's mother cuddles him on her lap before the father carries him tenderly to beg help from the Virgin Mary. The second image ushers us into an early modern childbirth scene (see Plate 2). The woman gives birth sitting on a chair, attended by a midwife and a female companion. Her husband faces away from this obstetrical drama. Kneeling, with his hat removed in a gesture of respect, he beseeches the Madonna dell'Arco and two male saints to intercede for the safe delivery of his child. The saints are probably St Joseph and St Leonard; the latter, depicted here brandishing handcuffs, was renowned for his protection of prisoners as well as babies attempting to escape from the womb. The third image, more sparse in its visual detail, is glossed by the curators at the museum of ex-votos in Tolentino as 'a girl falling into a wine barrel' (see Plate 3). Their surmise is that this represents a scene from the wine harvest, and so offers the historian a taste of the dangers experienced by a Renaissance child growing up in the countryside. This is in line with the curatorial view that the collection of ex-votos at Tolentino should be considered 'the Sistine Chapel of the Poor'.<sup>12</sup>

If the assumption that ex-voto images represent 'the poor' is sometimes belied by the details (neither the red stockings worn by the injured child in the Lonigo ex-voto nor the fashionable ruffs and collars in the Neapolitan example would have come cheap), at least it is true to say that the *dramatis personae* of these images are not restricted to members of wealthy elites and that their legibility is not dependent on learning and literacy. Moreover, the paintings shine light into some of the most inaccessible corners of Renaissance life — parenting, marriage and childhood, for example. But there is clearly a danger of being taken in by the charming directness of the images and assuming that these offer us relatively unmediated access to the intersections between the miraculous and the everyday. Before we go hunting for social history in this archive, we need to investigate the social history of the archive. What motivated the people who made and commissioned ex-votos in the Renaissance period? And how were such images shaped by those who collected and preserved them for posterity? In what follows, I shall direct my attention to the creators and users of these archives of miraculous events.

Here we encounter a number of obstacles from the outset. We know remarkably little about the production of painted votive tablets in the Renaissance era. Who created them? Were they produced by established

<sup>12</sup> Stefano Papetti, 'Gli ex-voto: la "Sistina dei poveri"', in Gatta *et al.* (eds.), *Per Grazia Ricevuta*.



1. Boy wounded by scissors, late fifteenth century. Tempera on panel. By kind permission of the Sanctuary of Madonna dei Miracoli, Lonigo.

artists and their assistants? Did they provide bread-and-butter income to painters awaiting more substantial commissions for altarpieces and portraits? Or were there specialized craft workshops dedicated to the production of these images? Our lack of answers to these questions in part reflects the priorities of art historical research. The intensive effort that is required to establish elusive attributions has not as yet been lavished on *The Girl in the Barrel* or *the Toddler with the Scissor Wound*.<sup>13</sup> Painted ex-votos pose particular problems of attribution. In the first place, the tablets themselves were not

<sup>13</sup> For an example of this kind of art historical enterprise when applied to work of high quality, see the recent catalogue by Victoria Avery and Paul Joannides, *A Michelangelo Discovery* (Cambridge, 2015). Gatta *et al.* (eds.), *Per Grazia Ricevuta*, attempts to attribute certain of the painted ex-votos at Tolentino to particular artists on grounds of style and context; see, for example, the discussion of a sixteenth-century tablet commissioned by Francesco Acciaccaferri, the woodworker responsible for executing the wooden choir in the main church in San Severino, from his colleague the local artist Bernardino di Mariotto, p. 376.





2. Woman in childbirth, late sixteenth century. Tempera on panel. By kind permission of the Sanctuary of Madonna dell' Arco.

signed by their makers.<sup>14</sup> Nor were they generally listed in account books, family archives and workshop records.<sup>15</sup> Transactions between the producers and consumers of painted ex-votos are therefore frustratingly invisible, so that we know very little about (for example) the relationship between images that were commissioned individually and those that were bought 'off the peg'. The canon of Italian artists established by the sixteenth-century art critic Giorgio Vasari scarcely seems relevant to the subculture of votive tablets, objects which did not owe their value and meaning to the artist's name but which were infused with personal and devotional significance.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> A possible exception survives at Tolentino, where a painted tablet is inscribed on the back 'Frater Joannes Franciscus de Tolentino fecit 1628'; Gatta *et al.* (eds.), *Per Grazia Ricevuta*, 102.

<sup>15</sup> Occasionally, payments for votive tablets do appear in the accounts of artists' workshops; see, for example, M. Muraro, *Pittura e società: il libro dei conti e la bottega dei Bassano* (Padua, 1982), 150.

<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, 1991). On the irrelevance of the Vasarian canon to the contemporary value of certain kinds of religious art, see Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles*, 29.





3. Girl falls into a barrel, sixteenth century. Tempera on panel. By kind permission of the Museum of San Nicola, Tolentino.

More information has come to light regarding the production of wax ex-votos. At the high end of the market, in Florence, the Benintendi family (also known as Fallimagini or 'image-makers') was renowned for supplying full-size votive effigies to patrons of the shrine of the Santissima Annunziata.<sup>17</sup> When the Madonna of the Oak at Viterbo shot to fame in 1468, the sacristans who supervised the shrine first employed the Ciffarelli family to provide wax votives. But once the Dominican fathers of the congregation of San Marco had taken charge of the shrine, at the start of the sixteenth century, they invited members of the Benintendi family to come from Florence to run the workshop; they remained in business there until 1609.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Lonigo, we know that the Olivetan monks who had custody of the shrine presided over two workshops 'for the sale of candles, statues, and other wax items'.<sup>19</sup> Pharmacies also purveyed large quantities of wax for use in votive

<sup>17</sup> Panzanelli, 'Compelling Presence', 13; Holmes, *Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Gianfranco Ciprini, 'La Madonna della Quercia: Una storia meravigliosa', in Anna Maria Tripputi (ed.), *PGR Per grazia ricevuta* (Paolo Malagrino Editore, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Q. Tassello, *Storia del Santuario della Madonna dei Miracoli di Lonigo* (Verona, 1942), 69.

practices.<sup>20</sup> At Issogne in the Val d'Aosta, an early sixteenth-century fresco depicts the interior of an apothecary's shop in which wax ex-votos (including anatomical models and human and animal figures alongside candles of various lengths) are shown hanging above the rows of pharmacy jars.<sup>21</sup>

Certain painted tablets do, however, furnish additional information regarding the circumstances of their production, thanks to the presence of inscriptions. These may be divided into two main types. Some simply carry an impersonal and formulaic tag, while others go some way to personalize and render specific the visual evidence. Of the first kind, various local distinctions may be observed. At Tolentino, sixteenth-century tablets often bear the Latin words 'EX VOTO', while the Italian phrase 'PER GRATIA RICEVUTA' (usually abbreviated to 'PGR') also appears. At Madonna dell'Arco the most common inscription is 'VFGA' which stands for 'VOTUM FECIT, GRATIAM ACCEPIT' ('she/he made a vow and received a grace'), although in some instances this is spelled out in its first person form ('VOTUM FECI ET GRACIAM ACCEPI'). This meaningful quartet of initials can be seen in the example of the childbirth scene already discussed (Plate 2); the letters are here written in a white panel in the shape of a leaf from the shrine's famous lime tree — the particular brand of the Madonna dell'Arco. The use of such formulae was far less popular at Lonigo and only seems to have taken off from the mid seventeenth century. By contrast, more personal inscriptions that name the beneficiary of the miracle and provide additional circumstantial information are relatively common here. From our sample of 150 votive tablets from Lonigo, more than 60 bear inscriptions that offer some specific information — at the very least a date or the initials of the beneficiary and sometimes a more detailed description of the miracle that has been experienced. Although a smaller proportion of ex-votos at Tolentino and Madonna dell'Arco carry longer inscriptions, and although erosion has rendered the writing in many instances illegible, nevertheless we are left with a good body of textual evidence from across the three shrines. On the basis of this evidence we can get closer to understanding how painted votive tablets worked as records.

For all their abruptness, formulaic inscriptions such as 'PGR' and 'VFGA' already begin to locate the tablets within a culture of record-keeping, since they hint at a link between the mindset of the devotee and that of the merchant, the latter so extensively documented in the vast family and notarial

<sup>20</sup> James Shaw and Evelyn Welch, *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence* (Amsterdam and New York, 2011), 167.

<sup>21</sup> Evelyn Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1400–1600* (New Haven, CT, 2005), 68.

archives that were created in Renaissance Italy.<sup>22</sup> An ex-voto attested to a contract that had been completed, a good that had been received, so the language of accounts and economic transactions was appropriate. Sometimes the longer inscriptions flesh out this facet of the brief formulae. For example, one of the earliest painted ex-votos, which survives in Tolentino (Plate 4), shows a woman kneeling in prayer in front of a crib, with a small wooden cross in her hands, and beneath her the inscription:

I DONNA PIRA, A GENOESE WOMAN LIVING IN SENIGALLIA  
[on the Adriatic coast, north of Tolentino], HER NEWBORN  
BABY BEING ILL, I MADE A VOW TO THIS GLORIOUS  
SAINT, THE VOW BEING MADE, THE GRACE WAS  
RECEIVED BY MIRACLES SHOWN TO MASTER ANTONIO,  
BABY, MCCCC AND NINETY-THREE ON THE XI DAY OF  
AUGUST IN SENIGALLIA.<sup>23</sup>

As is typical, the grace follows the vow and the fulfilment of the contract, often implied by 'PGR' or 'VFGA', is here spelled out.

A faded tablet from Lonigo, in which the image and inscription were made on paper that was stuck onto the wooden board, sheds further light on the nature of the desire to record:

It is clear and manifest to every person how I Messer Zaneto de Friza from Longara made a vow at Santa Maria di Lonigo on behalf of my two sons who were at this time losing blood from their noses and, by the grace of the mother of Christ, the bleeding was staunched and this I report with infinite thanks, *laus deo*, occurred in 1506.<sup>24</sup>

Here the inscription is phrased in terms of an official declaration. The purpose of the ex-voto is not only to record the individual experiences of Messer Zaneto de Friza and his sons but also to proclaim their experiences to a public audience. This suggests that, as well as having a contractual function, ex-votos played a certificatory role, not far removed from that of the written legal or statutory records found in notarial archives.

At the same time as they publicize them, the longer inscriptions also particularize the graces experienced by individual devotees. The identity of the beneficiary of the miracle is expressed through the recording of names and

<sup>22</sup> For a classic account of the mental world of the Italian Renaissance merchant, see Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato* (London, 1957); on account books, see also Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*, 220–43.

<sup>23</sup> Gatta *et al.* (eds.), *Per Grazia Ricevuta*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Lora *et al.* (eds.), *Le tavolette votive della Madonna dei Miracoli di Lonigo*, 76.



4. Ex-voto given by Donna Pira, 1493. Tempera on panel. By kind permission of the Museum of San Nicola, Tolentino.

places of origin. This contrasts markedly with anatomical votives (it is impossible to tell one wax leg from another) although, as will be seen, there is some evidence to suggest that three-dimensional ex-votos could have accompanying inscriptions and other methods of personalization in this period. The ability to identify specific people experiencing specific miracles is one of the defining strengths of the painted votive tablet. Even in cases where no text was supplied — as with the child injured by scissors or the girl falling head first into a wine barrel — the specificity of the incident would have allowed individuals and wider communities to identify the characters who were represented. On the other hand, serially produced painted tablets representing men, women and children in their sick beds often included a blank cartouche in which the *miracolato* or beneficiary of a miracle could insert his or her

personal details. Admittedly there are plenty of generic depictions of the sick which bear no inscription or date, but even in these cases the details (such as the design of the quilt on the bed or the addition of a rosary or cross) work to particularize the image. The presence of inscriptions in a sizable minority of cases points to the strong sense of ownership that is a more general characteristic of votive tablets.

These examples show the ways in which painted ex-votos might serve to project the self onto the wider community. As such, they might be assumed into the old Burckhardtian narrative of Renaissance individualism, or used to reinforce more recent narratives relating to Renaissance self-fashioning and the history of autobiography.<sup>25</sup> Relevant here are the life-size votive effigies made of wax that became fashionable at Santissima Annunziata in Florence in the fifteenth century. In his study of 1911, the Viennese art historian Julius von Schlosser classed these as 'wax portraits', and with good cause: they were often pieces of sophisticated artistry that preserved the particular features of the subject and which were dressed in the sitter's own clothes — a far cry from the anonymous wax limbs or other body parts available from the local pharmacy.<sup>26</sup> We might see the emergence of votive tablets in the late fifteenth century as part of a trend to record the individual as well as the miracle, although any such claim would need immediately to be nuanced by some acknowledgement of the importance of the family to the culture of the ex-voto.<sup>27</sup> The household, rather than the individual, is often their fundamental unit of currency.

But of course ex-votos did not only function as a means by which individuals and their families might commemorate the miracles with which they had been blessed. They also served collectively to record the efficacy of a particular saint or shrine. To get a sense of the mass of ex-votos that cluttered early modern shrines, we can turn to Montaigne's account of his visit in 1581 to the Holy House of Loreto. This was the central Italian shrine whither the Virgin Mary's home had, it was said, been transported by angels in the late thirteenth century. At the centre of a large Renaissance basilica there stood the small brick house from Nazareth in which the Annunciation had supposedly taken

<sup>25</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Oxford [first published 1868]); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning* (Chicago, 1980); Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Julius von Schlosser, 'History of Portraiture in Wax', trans. James Michael Loughbridge, in Panzanelli (ed.), *Ephemeral Bodies*, 230–1.

<sup>27</sup> On the creation of visual identity in this period, see Valentin Groebner, *Who Are You? Identification, Deception and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 2007), 31–64.

place. Montaigne described the interior of the little building as ‘so heavily adorned with rich votive tablets . . . that all the way to the ground there is not an inch of space empty’. The sanctuary that surrounded the holy house was equally crowded. Montaigne concluded: ‘All this great church is covered with tablets, paintings and stories’.<sup>28</sup>

The custodians in charge of early modern sanctuaries were faced with a series of challenges familiar to every archivist: how best to store, sort, catalogue and make accessible an ever-expanding collection of records. The compulsion of certain sacristans (again, like archivists) to make inventories of their treasures gives us some insight into the functioning of these archives of miracles. One purpose of such lists was to record the value of items deposited at a shrine. It is striking that an inventory of ex-votos drawn up at Madonna dell’ Arco in the 1590s, the very period when painted tablets began to proliferate at this shrine, mentions not one such tablet. Ex-votos wrought in gold and silver, *agnus dei*, rosaries and other kinds of devotional jewellery, and gifts of cloth are itemized in some detail.<sup>29</sup> The implication is that painted ex-votos did not carry significant financial worth. Unlike wax, which could be burned, or precious metals, which could be sold or stolen, painted ex-votos did not have a reuse value. The transaction that beneficiaries of miracles engaged in when they left votive tablets at shrines was, in a sense, final.

The promotion of local cults was another spur to the collecting of votive evidence. In 1325, in the proceedings initiated to investigate the sanctity of Nicholas of Tolentino just twenty years after his death, votive offerings left at the shrine were carefully documented as evidence of miracles.<sup>30</sup> But even when canonization was not the driving motive, clergy and public officials worked tirelessly to publicize the miraculous reputation of a local Madonna or Saint. To this end, the technology of print provided new possibilities. From the 1470s, generic compilations of Marian miracles poured off the presses. These were soon followed by more specific regional publications that broadcast the miracles generated by local shrines.<sup>31</sup> By the end of the sixteenth century, it seems to have become common practice for the authors of these texts — usually

<sup>28</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Travel Journal*, trans. and ed. Donald M. Frame (North Point Press, 1983), 107–8.

<sup>29</sup> *Libro nel quale si notano giornalmente tutti li mobile, come sono voti d’argento, tovaglie et ogni altra sorte di paramenti*, ms. Madonna dell’Arco, 1592–3. I am grateful to Irene Galandra Cooper for sharing with me her transcription of this document.

<sup>30</sup> Nicola Occhioni (ed.), *Il processo per la canonizzazione di S. Nicola da Tolentino* (Rome, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> Anne Jacobson Schutte, *Printed Italian Vernacular Religious Books 1465–1550: A Finding List* (Geneva, 1983).



members of a religious order with a responsibility for care of the shrine — to include an account of the ex-voto along with the story of each miracle. Thus, a book about the life and miracles of the Blessed Giovannibuono of Mantua, an Augustinian hermit who lived in the thirteenth century, written by Costanzo Lodi, a member of the same order, and published in 1590, recorded a series of wax votive offerings: a pair of ears left at the shrine by a deaf man, Signor Buonvicino; a length of wax ‘as long as my son’, deposited by the mother of a boy aged four or five who was suffering from an infirmity that affected one of his toes; ‘two wax eyes’, given by the mother and aunt of a little boy, cured from blindness; and ‘a hand with an arm made of wax’ left by Signora Altavilla, who could move neither her hand nor arm.<sup>32</sup>

If the ex-votos presented at the shrine of Giovannibuono were predominantly made of wax, the evidence from the Florentine shrine of Santissima Annunziata is more varied. Here the Servite friar Luca Ferrini was a conscientious chronicler of both miracles wrought and ex-votos brought.<sup>33</sup> His illustrated book, published in 1593, *The Crown of Sixty-three Miracles of the Nunziata of Florence*, recounted a selection of graces, one for each year of the Virgin’s life, which had occurred since the image of the Annunciation had first revealed its miraculous properties in 1252. At the end of each miracle story, Ferrini recorded the votive offering left by the supplicant. Conforming with our assumption that painted tablets did not emerge until the late fifteenth century, they are absent from Ferrini’s accounts of the earlier miracles, the first appearance occurring at miracle number 22, dated 1544. After this point, he lists fourteen ‘tablets’ and eighteen ‘images’ (the latter explicitly or implicitly made of wax) together with a scattering of other objects, including several silver items that had been stolen from the church during the 1529–30 Siege of Florence, and donations of cash, clothes and crutches. Ferrini provides precise indications as to the condition of the ex-votos — wax models were particularly likely to be listed as ‘broken’ or ‘ruined’ — and where they were located, whether ‘above the altar’, ‘suspended in the middle of the church’, or ‘attached to the main door of the church’. The meticulous documentation provided by Ferrini of a material archive which is no longer extant suggests the power of ex-votos to speak as testimony of miracles.

<sup>32</sup> *Vita et miracoli del beato Giovannibuono Mantoano, eremita agostiniano: Morto già Trecento & quarantadue anni sono. Raccolti et descritti da F. Costanzo Lodi, da S. Gervaso Bresciano, teologo dell'istesso Ordine dell' Osservanza di Lombardia* (Bergamo, 1590), 101, 104, 108, 111. On gifts of wax ex-votos of the length or weight of the beneficiary, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 153.

<sup>33</sup> Luca Ferrini, *Coróna di sessanta tre Miracoli della nunziata di Firenze scritti à honore e reverenza di sessanta tre Anni, che visse la Beata Vergine in questo Mondo* (Florence, 1593).



Another work in this genre is the *History* of the Madonna of Lonigo written by the Reverend Father Dom Giovanni Domenico Bertani, an Olivetan monk from Verona, and published in 1605.<sup>34</sup> Bertani, like Ferrini, was a scrupulous record-keeper, who noted the presence not only of ‘statues’ and ‘tablets’ but also of inscriptions (which, alas, he did not transcribe). It is noteworthy that Bertani records inscriptions for both the painted ex-votos and the ‘statues’, the latter referring to three-dimensional figurative images. Here we see the urge to particularize votive offerings extending beyond votive tablets to their three-dimensional counterparts, in an echo of the votive portraits at the Santissima Annunziata in Florence. Bertani’s overriding goal was to assemble as much evidence as possible — material, visual and textual — in support of Lonigo’s miraculous reputation.

The recording of material ex-votos in written texts therefore alerts us to their testimonial role. Their presence lent weight to the claims being made by the authors of miracle books regarding the efficacy of their local cults. An expression deployed by Bertani is ‘*in fede di*’ — a phrase belonging to the language of legal documents which translates roughly as ‘in proof whereof’. Thus, in recounting a miracle in which a man was injured in the stomach by a millstone, Bertani informed us that, having made a votive offering to the miraculous image of the Madonna, the miller was cured; ‘in proof of which miracle, one sees an old tablet with its inscription’.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, the miraculous cure of a man from the ‘French disease’ in 1501 was attested by the presence of a votive tablet; ‘in proof whereof one sees a tablet with its inscription’.<sup>36</sup> Bertani used this same term, ‘*fede*’, to describe the collective power of the ex-votos in authenticating the miracle-working credentials of the Lonigo cult:

There is no place in this world, whether on the earth or in the sea, where the rays of Mercy [of the Madonna of Lonigo] do not shine; undoubted proof of this are the many votive offerings, both those that were brought in former times and those that continue to be hung by the miraculous image. These serve as so many tongues to thank and magnify the great Mercy of the most Glorious Mother.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Giovanni Domenico Bertani, *Historia della gloriosa imagine della Madonna di Lonico* (Verona, 1605).

<sup>35</sup> Bertani, *Historia della gloriosa imagine della Madonna di Lonico*, 37. For a broader discussion of evidence in the early modern period, see Richard Serjeantson, ‘Proof and Persuasion’, in Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Science*, iii, *Early Modern Science* (Cambridge, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Bertani, *Historia della gloriosa imagine della Madonna di Lonico*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

The perceived validator role of the ex-votos in ‘proving’ the efficacy of the cult is beyond dispute. So too is their rhetorical function. For Bertani they served as tongues: they were eloquent and persuasive, working on the emotions of those who witnessed them. But this affective force is linked to the documentary function of the images, which have a cumulative historical value as witnesses to the miraculous. The status of material ex-votos as historical evidence was taken for granted by the papal secretary and self-styled humanist historian Flavio Biondo, who, writing in the mid fifteenth century, observed that the basilica at Loreto

provides the most striking evidence that God listens to the prayers of suppliants through intercession of His Mother — those whose prayers have been answered have hung up votive offerings of gold and silver, wax and pieces of cloth, garments of linen and wool, which though they would fetch a high price and nearly fill the entire basilica, the bishop keeps untouched for the glory of God and the Virgin.<sup>38</sup>

Citing ex-votos as a material source was entirely compatible with Renaissance standards of historical scholarship.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, Ferrini and Bertani — champions of votive evidence par excellence — were keen to show off their credentials as archival historians. Ferrini cited a number of manuscript sources held in the library of the Servite convent in Florence in support of his account.<sup>40</sup> Bertani provided transcriptions of documents relating to the foundation of the first church at Lonigo and even supplied the shelf-mark for a copy of a privilege granted by Pope Alexander III in 1177 ‘which is found in the Archive of this Monastery, in the location 2 Calto B.B.B. number 6’.<sup>41</sup> In reconstructing the foundation story of the shrine, in which thieves had attacked the image of the Madonna, who had lifted up her left hand to soothe her wounded eye and put her right hand to her bleeding breast, Bertani relied

<sup>38</sup> Flavio Biondo, *Italy Illuminated*, i, I–IV, ed. and trans. Jeffrey A. White (I Tatti Renaissance Library, xx, Cambridge Mass., 2005), 263–5.

<sup>39</sup> On humanist historical scholarship, see Donald Kelley, ‘The Theory of History’, in Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner and Eckhard Kessler (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>40</sup> Ferrini, *Coróna di sessanta tre Miracoli della nunziata di Firenze*, fo. 5r; Ferrini’s sources are discussed by Sara Matthews-Grieco, ‘Media, Memory and the Miracoli della SS Annunziata’, *Word and Image*, xxv (2009), 275.

<sup>41</sup> Bertani, *Historia della gloriosa imagine della Madonna di Lonico*, 8–11. According to Giuseppe Boerio, *Dizionario del dialetto veneziano*, 3rd edn (Venice, 1867), ‘calto’ means a compartment in a cupboard.

not only on popular tradition but also on the records of the trial of the thieves, undertaken by the criminal courts of Verona and lodged in the Register of the Notaries, 'an authentic copy' of which was preserved at the monastery.<sup>42</sup> The same urge to provide a paper trail is evident at the nearby shrine of Monte Berico in Vicenza, also dedicated to the Virgin Mary and founded in 1428.<sup>43</sup> Here, the author of a history published in 1527 drew on a notarial record produced in 1430–31 and still preserved in the Biblioteca Bertoliana in Vicenza.<sup>44</sup> This had been commissioned by the Order of Santa Brigida, the religious community initially charged with custody of Monte Berico, in order to prove the veracity of the legend of foundation and to enhance the status of the city's new shrine. The document, which is presented as a *processus* or trial, presents the testimony of thirty-two contemporary witnesses interrogated at the Palazzo del Comune.

While the authors of miracle books made much of the archival sources upon which they are based, there was no sense in which the material evidence of ex-votos was deemed an inferior source. In relation to Santissima Annunziata, Sara Matthews-Grieco goes so far as to claim that 'the hierarchy of media Ferrini seems to have considered appropriate for preserving the memory of miraculous intercession . . . gave pride of place to tangible objects and images'.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, the notaries who presented the evidence for the miraculous origins of Monte Berico enumerated ex-votos alongside the human witnesses whose testimony they cited: 'Let gold, silver, iron, and wax images also bear witness. And the crutches of those who had formerly been cripples'.<sup>46</sup>

If material and visual ex-votos had a particular role in underpinning the miraculous histories of Italian Renaissance shrines, they were also a fragile source. As has already been mentioned, Luca Ferrini was especially sensitive to the state of repair of the ex-votos at the Santissima Annunziata, which presented the Servite friars with an ongoing challenge of

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>43</sup> *Operetta molto devotissima novamēte in luce produtta: A cōsolatiōe de li devoti et disquegliati spiriti: Nella quale si cōtiene una nō men devota che curiosa istoria. La quale cōpiutamēte dichiara tutto il muodo di lo stupēdo edifitio et mirabile costruzione di santa Maria Dimonte fuori li muri di Vicenza situata . . . Quai non piccola devotione partoriscono agli devoti Lettori* (Venice, 1527).

<sup>44</sup> Biblioteca Bertoliana di Vicenza; *Gonzati* 7.1.65. For a facsimile edition and transcription of this document, see Graziano Maria Casarotto (ed.), *La costruzione del santuario mariano di Monte Berico* (Vicenza, 1991).

<sup>45</sup> Matthews-Grieco, 'Media, Memory and the Miracoli della SS Annunziata', 275–6.

<sup>46</sup> Casarotto (ed.), *La costruzione del santuario mariano di Monte Berico*, 77.

conservation.<sup>47</sup> These are regularly described as being destroyed, broken or in need of repair. Occasionally, an ex-voto is noted as being ‘*rifatta*’ or ‘remade’ and — in one instance, presumably on account of a family connection to the author of the miracle book — the conservator is named: the ‘image’ left by Filippo Spani, a Knight of the Order of Rhodes, ‘was remade by Father Brother Raffaello Ferrini Servite’.<sup>48</sup> In another example, Ferrini cited the preemptive measures that might be taken by the community in case of an ex-voto that was at once significant and also delicate. Two of the shrine’s elite patrons, the princes Filippo Duke of Milan and Niccolò d’Este had brought silver, money and a very large wax work ‘such as had never been seen before’ to the Annunziata to give thanks to the Virgin for delivering them from the plague. In order to ensure that their offering would serve ‘as a perpetual memory’, the Fathers made a replica of it in wood, which was present at the time Ferrini was writing, ‘suspended in the middle of the church’.<sup>49</sup>

At the Madonna of the Oak at Viterbo in the early seventeenth century, the Dominicans in charge of the sanctuary embarked on a major project of restoration, again especially targeted towards the ex-votos that had been left by elite patrons. An entry in the account book notes:

I record how on the 26th day of October 1608 the task of restoring a large part of the ex-votos in the church was completed, that is the two popes; the horse of Spiriti was remade; all the cardinals and the ex-votos displayed on the columns. All those attached to the columns amounting to 70, which were in large part broken, all of them lacking a principal element, such as the head, arms, hands, feet.<sup>50</sup>

Less than ten years later, the friars at Viterbo had developed a new strategy for the preservation of their votive collection. In 1619, the chief sacristan Tommaso Bandoni decided that the ex-votos, especially those made of wax, should be reproduced by the Viterbese painter Vincenzo Panicale as a sort of catalogue, in order that

when a *voto* is broken, and ends up in powder, it will be possible to remake it with the model painted in the book, that shows, how they

<sup>47</sup> On the decayed state of the Annunziata ex-votos by the eighteenth century, see Martin Wackernagel, *The World of the Florentine Artist: Projects and Patrons, Workshop and Art Market*, trans. Alison Luchs (Princeton, NJ, 1981 [first pub. Leipzig, 1938]), 79.

<sup>48</sup> Ferrini, *Coróna di sessanta tre Miracoli della nunziata di Firenze*, fo. 42<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, fos. 136<sup>r</sup>–137<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> Andrea Daninos (ed.), *Avere una bella cera: le figure in cera a Venezia e in Italia* (Milan, 2012), 91.

are in life; and we must ensure that they are diligently maintained in future, for they are the jewels and the ornaments of this church.<sup>51</sup>

This collection of watercolour copies of ex-votos, which was expanded across the course of the seventeenth century, survives to this day, bearing witness to the success of Bandoni's plan.<sup>52</sup> Plate 5, with its back and front views and array of swords sticking into the victim at every angle, shows the attempt to replicate a three-dimensional wax image in two dimensions. Other examples convey the flat forms of painted votive tablets. Brief manuscript accounts of the miracles accompany each illustration: they provide additional information, but clearly play the subservient role in this visual archive of Viterbo's miraculous Madonna.

The compulsion to make visual records of visual records is also evident in Ferrini's 1593 volume. Here, every miracle comes with its own woodcut illustration, which deploys the iconography of a painted votive tablet, often including a depiction of the miraculous image of the Virgin Annunciate (Plate 6). The elaborate frames that surround each image attempt to render their material forms more acutely, though paradoxically painted ex-votos were rarely presented with such decorative flourishes. The value of material evidence was such that it was best recorded in ostentatiously material form. Ferrini's remediations, which translated paint on panel into ink on paper, were part of his project to draw together sixty-three votive records from the Annunziata as a personal ex-voto. The book offered thanks to the Virgin for the author's miraculous recovery from a quartan fever — contracted, Ferrini notes with his usual precision, on 20 October 1584.<sup>53</sup> The compiler offers a votive image of himself, sick in bed, following a standard iconographic scheme of the painted votive tablet, and he renders his ex-voto all the more material by calling his book a *Coróna* — a 'crown' or 'rosary' for the Virgin.<sup>54</sup>

### III

This essay has surveyed the changing form of Renaissance Italian ex-votos, and the ways in which they were compiled and conserved in a variety of

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> In a more personal example of replication, it has been suggested that Montaigne may have commissioned a copy of the ex-voto he had left at Loreto as a souvenir; see Concetta Cavallini, 'Le tourisme religieux en Italie dans la seconde moitié du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Montaigne et les français à Lorette', in Philippe Desan et Giovanni Dotoli (eds.), *D'un siècle à l'autre: littérature et société de 1590 à 1610* (Fasano, 2001), 150.

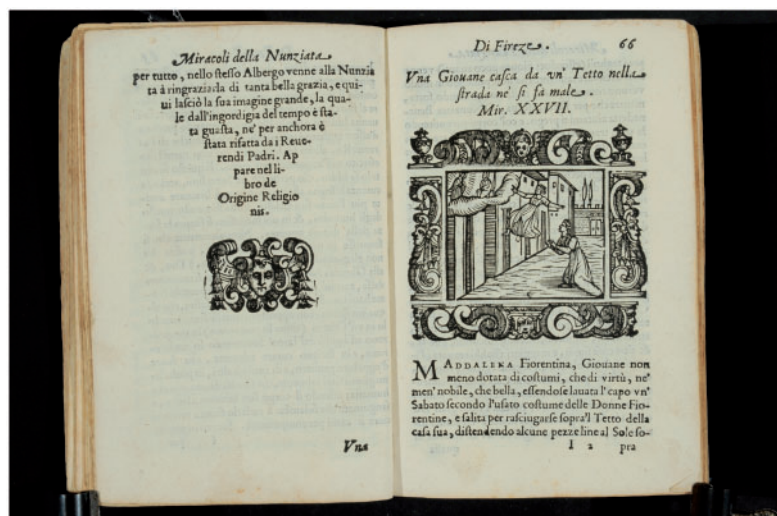
<sup>53</sup> Ferrini, *Coróna di sessanta tre Miracoli della nunziata di Firenze*, 140<sup>v</sup>–141<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Maniura, *Pilgrimage to Images in the Fifteenth Century: The Origins of the Cult of Our Lady of Czestochowa* (Woodbridge, 2004), 108, argues that miracle stories are the textual equivalent of votive offerings.



5. Hieronimo Petroni set upon by bandits, 1526; Vincenzo Panicali, 'Libro dei miracoli', fo. 86, seventeenth century. Ink and watercolour on paper. Collezione Giovan Battista Goretto, Biblioteca della Fondazione Marco Besso, inv. 03405/5213. By kind permission of the Fondazione Marco Besso, Rome.

shrines across the peninsula, in order to argue that votive offerings came to function as archives of the miraculous. Their relationships to other forms of testimony and certification are legible in the inscriptions that often accompanied them, and were clearly felt by those who cited them as proof in written records, especially printed miracle books. Nevertheless, ex-votos did not merely work in service to, and by means of, text. On the contrary, the material presence of votive offerings in all their rich diversity was judged to carry intense rhetorical power. As is clear from contemporary accounts, that power emanated in part from the accumulation of ex-votos; it was located in the space of the shrine and was enhanced by the rituals of pilgrimage and donation that accompanied the physical placing of each offering within the larger display. In common with other kinds of archive, these material records formed part of a larger whole, a body of evidence gathered together for a collective purpose. And yet the physical form of ex-votos often proved resistant to the intentions of those who deposited and curated them: wax crumbled, paint flaked. Miracle books bear witness to the determination of those charged with the maintenance of the shrines to repair, restore, replicate and record ex-votos, since their decay or removal would compromise the



6. A girl falls from the roof onto the street and suffers no harm; Luca Ferrini, *Coróna di sessanta tre Miracoli della nunziata di Firenze* (Florence: Giorgio Marescotti, 1593), fo. 66<sup>r</sup> (Miracle 23). By kind permission of the Biblioteca Maruccelliana, Florence.

integrity of the archive. The fact that ex-votos were recorded not only in lists and verbal accounts but also by woodcut illustrations and watercolours that strove to represent their physical forms indicates the particular significance of their materiality. These observations concur with recent work that has emphasized both the power and the resistance of objects.<sup>55</sup> The evidence surveyed here suggests the fruitfulness of bringing the archival turn into dialogue with the material turn.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (Oxford, 1998); Andrew Pickering, 'Material Culture and the Dance of Agency', in Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford, 2010); Ulinka Rublack, 'Matter in the Material Renaissance', *Past and Present*, no. 219 (May 2013).

<sup>56</sup> For some first contributions towards that dialogue, see Claudia Salmini, 'Buildings, Furnishing, Access and Use: Examples from the Archive of the Venetian Chancery, from Medieval to Modern Times' (London, 1998); Filippo de Vivo, 'Cœur de l'État, lieu de tension: Le tournant archivistique vu de Venise (XV<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle)', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, lxviii (2013), 717–18 and 724–5; and Jessica Berenbeim, *Art of Documentation: Documents and Visual Culture in Medieval England* (Toronto, 2015).