

Blood, Paint, and a Killer Commission

Enshrining San Gennaro, Naples' Protector Saint

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Blood operates as matter, miracle, and metaphor in the Treasury Chapel of Naples Cathedral. The city's most prestigious artistic commission, the chapel houses the holy relics of San Gennaro, Naples' protector saint: his bones and blood, which miraculously liquifies on feast days and special occasions. Gennaro is believed to have saved Naples, nicknamed "city of blood," from such catastrophes as the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Deeming that artistic talent was lacking in early modern Naples, the deputies of the Treasury Chapel turned north to Rome to contract an artist to fulfill the commission. Painting was artists' lifeblood. The potential threat that outsiders posed to the livelihoods of local artists prompted various forms of protectionism that could lead to bloodshed, but which, nevertheless, did not amount to cruelty for its own sake. Enshrining Naples' most revered relics, the Treasury Chapel heightens the tensions between urban solidarity and competition, inclusion and exclusion, piety and violence. Weaving together the themes of the body, the everyday, and the miraculous, this essay unravels the artistic, social, and religious complexities of blood in seventeenth-century Naples.

Introduction

Blood pulsates throughout the Treasury Chapel of Naples Cathedral (Ill. 1). Materially, it takes the form of the blood relic of San Gennaro (Saint Januarius), the third-century bishop of Benevento and protector saint of the city of Naples. Filling two sacred ampoules, the saint's blood is transformational: miraculously, the hardened blood relic liquefies on feast days and special occasions. Metaphorically, blood binds and divides the artists behind the



ILL. 1.
Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro, Naples Cathedral. Interior view (liturgical south-west).
Photo: Scala, Florence.

artworks that adorn the chapel. The city's most esteemed decorative commission, the Treasury Chapel visually and materially stages the encounter between the "good," miraculous blood of the saint, and the "bad," rivalrous blood between artists, both outsiders and insiders. The liquidity of oil paint, brushed on precious copper supports, simulates the viscosity of blood. Artistically, the figures in the paintings – made of oil on copper, contrasting with the bones and blood relics nearby – are seemingly animated by the blood running beneath their skins. Anatomically, blood flows through the veins of all those worshippers and witnesses to the chapel. When entering the sacred space today, its holy Treasury is transformed into a modern

museum. One encounters a sign that reads: “*Dove si trova il sangue? Non è visibile! Chiuso in cassaforte dietro l’altare della cappella.*” (“Where is the blood? You can’t see the blood. It is closed in a safe behind the altar.”) This sign points to a host of problems raised by blood in the Treasury Chapel: its visibility and invisibility; its transformational potentiality from solid to liquid and back again; its miraculous and holy qualities; and its metaphorical implications in the chapel’s construction, decoration, and reception. Blood is simultaneously subject and object; revered and contested; material and miraculous; holy and imaginary.

Competing for our attention are the various cast members, dramatically staged in this spectacular setting: the architecture, the saint, the relics, the reliquaries, the miracle, and the paintings and sculptures on view. A votive chapel the size of a small church, the Treasury Chapel was built to fulfill a vow made to encourage Gennaro’s intercession during the crippling plague of 1526-27. Construction took place from 1608 to 1612, although decoration continued into the 1770s. Despite the chapel’s grandeur, San Gennaro is a rather obscure figure. Born around 270, he became bishop of Benevento (near Naples), and he resisted persecution during the reign of Emperor Diocletian. Gennaro was beheaded in 305 as a Christian in Pozzuoli, yet before his eventual martyrdom, he suffered the triple punishment of being thrown to wolves, hurled into a raging furnace, and imprisoned, all of which he miraculously survived. Scenes from Gennaro’s life and death populate the paintings that adorn the chapel. Notable episodes include a fresco by Domenichino depicting the saint’s miraculous restoration of sight to one of his persecutors, and the famous altarpiece by Ribera of San Gennaro emerging unscathed from a furnace (Ill. 2). Both artists emerge as bitter rivals in the early modern biographical sources, which provide a colorful, if somewhat embellished account of the volatile relations between the painters vying for this prestigious commission.

The miracle of Gennaro’s blood was not unique in Naples.¹ On his visit to the city in 1632, the Parisian abbot Jean-Jacques Bouchard coined the phrase *urbs sanguinum*, or “city of blood,” to describe Naples with its numerous liquefying blood relics (Bouchard, 1977, p. 282). In 1607-08, the municipal secretary Giulio Cesare Capaccio referred to the liquefying blood relics of Gennaro, John the Baptist, Nicholas of Tolentino, Patricia,



Pantaleon, and Stephen (Capaccio, 1882, pp. 25-26).² By the late sixteenth century, Naples had procured seven patron saints, with an additional 21 recognized between 1631 and 1710. The city now boasts over 50 patron saints, but Gennaro is its principal protector.

Much ink has been spilled over the Treasury Chapel of Naples Cathedral and the blood miracle of San Gennaro.³ The most extensive critical study has recently been undertaken by art historian Helen Hills. Hers is not a historical narrative of the chapel's building and decoration; rather, she interrogates a range of issues concerning "miracle and temporality, materials and materiality, local topographies and telluric philosophy, form and affect, niche and mobility, sanctity and transformation" (Hills, 2016, p. 4). This essay draws on Hills' scholarship and endeavors to extend the discussion of Gennaro's blood miracle by stretching the blood metaphor to include professional rivalry in the decoration of the chapel, a microcosm of the tensions between foreigners and locals, outsiders and insiders, that ripped through the city. Turning to primary sources, notably the early modern biographical accounts, the essay casts a critical eye on the rhetorical construction of rivalry within the chapel's cultural imaginary. How do the various conceptions and manifestations of blood – physical, artistic, holy, and miraculous – intersect in the chapel? What were the shifting attitudes towards blood in early modern Naples? The essay argues that the different stages of the blood miracle are echoed in the story of the chapel's artistic commission: suspense, disappointment, rage, miraculous event – all unfold in the drama of the decoration. Progressing from the concrete to the abstract – from the defining characteristics of the relic and its reliquary; to the material properties of blood; to its miraculous transformations; to its metaphorical implications in the fierce competition underpinning the chapel's painterly decoration – this essay sheds further light on the complex and contradictory nature of blood in the Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro,

ILL. 2. (OPPOSITE)

Jusepe de Ribera: *San Gennaro Emerging Unharméd from the Furnace*, 1646, oil on copper, 355 × 220 cm. Onofrio D'Alessio: Frame set with gilt bronze and lapis lazuli. Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro, Naples Cathedral. Photo: Scala, Florence.

tracing points of commonality and disparity, friction and fluidity, affinity and animosity, faith and doubt.

Blood Relic and Reliquary

The blood relic of San Gennaro is stored in two glass ampoules of unequal size, both of which are enclosed in a circular reliquary measuring 12 centimeters in diameter (Ill. 3). The blood in the larger, elliptical vial performs the miraculous liquefaction, which occurs (or fails to do so) on three types of occasions (Hills, 2016, p. 107, n. 150). First, on the three feast days of the saint: his birthday on September 19; the translation of his relics on the Saturday before the first Sunday in May; and – after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1631 – on December 16. Second, the blood liquefies on the occasion of special visits to the Treasury Chapel by popes, dignitaries, and other senior officials. Third, the blood liquefies prematurely, promptly, or resists liquefaction during times of peril in the city of Naples, notably revolt and plague. The first record of the miracle occurring in Naples Cathedral was in 1389. When the blood relic does liquefy, the time required for its liquefaction could vary from minutes to hours or even days (Hills, 2016, pp. 69, 77, 80-81). Ultimately, San Gennaro's miracle was regular but not reliable.⁴

The miraculous liquefaction of the blood relic carried with it a multiplicity of meanings, which affirmed San Gennaro's intercession with God in heaven on behalf of Naples. Etymologically, a relic refers to that which remains; in a Christian context, it connotes sacred remains that bear witness to an individual's self-sacrifice and signify the non-putrefaction of the holy body. For medievalist Cynthia Hahn, "a relic is a physical object that is understood to carry the *virtus* of a saint or Christ [...] It could be a bone or bones, some other portion of the body, or merely some object that has been sanctified by coming into contact with a sacred person." She reminds us that "without some form of recognition, a relic is merely bone, dust, or scraps of cloth" (Hahn, 2010, pp. 290-91). Therefore, not only is an audience essential to authenticate a relic, but also relics specifically emerge as such through their staging in a reliquary (Hills, 2016, p. 40). For Hahn, reliquaries are "a mediation between relics and audiences [...] In



ILL. 3.
Pope Francis kisses the reliquary with the blood of San Gennaro in Naples Cathedral, 2015. Photo: Paul Haring.

the modern sense they are not art works and surely not ‘art for art’s sake.’ They are intended to elicit veneration and to honor the relic – but beauty is decidedly subservient to these primary needs” (Hahn, 2010, p. 291). Indeed, the Treasury Chapel itself may be read as an architectural reliquary, given the analogous manner in which it defines, enhances, and enshrines the blood relic (Hahn and Klein, 2015, pp. 6-7).

Central to the miracle of San Gennaro are the intersecting problems of sight, visibility, and change (Hills, 2013, p. 39; Hills, 2016, p. 81). Visually and conceptually framed by frescoes and altarpieces narrating episodes from Gennaro’s biography, the miracle is prompted by sight through the visual encounter of the saint’s blood and head relics in the presence of the faithful. Miracles produce witnesses, and witnesses produce miracles. Alongside the blood relic, the silver reliquary bust containing Gennaro’s skull was ritually adorned during feasts and at times of crisis in the city (Ill. 4). Highly significant is the life-size bust form of the head reliquary, which indicates that

it occupies simultaneously the terrestrial and celestial spheres, functioning both as reliquary bust and living saint, adorned on earth and celebrated in heaven (Hills, 2013, pp. 48, 51, 54).⁵ Reliquaries served to reveal relics, yet they also concealed them: Gennaro's blood is thus veiled and unveiled in the sacred ampoule, which is kissed by devout worshippers (Ill. 3). What may be discerned is the physical change, or lack thereof, in the color, texture, viscosity, temperature, and volume of the blood relic. Obscurity is necessary for revelation, while ambiguity, complexity, and – ultimately – suspense characterize the miracle (Hills, 2013, p. 59; Hills, 2016, p. 66). Even when it resists change, the blood relic still carries its miraculous potentiality: the miracle of liquefaction is held in suspense in the holy blood.

Blood Matter

At the core of the Treasury Chapel is the matter of blood, its substance and significance, its instability and unpredictability. The changeable nature of Gennaro's blood relic encompasses a shift in appearance and materiality from dust to fluid, brown to crimson, congealed to liquid, fixed to animate, cool to boiling. This metamorphosis involves not only the liquefaction of blood in the reliquary ampoule, but also the transformation of the chapel's visitor into a worshipper, and the worshipper into a witness (Hills, 2016, p. 30). For Hills, "Crucial to the power of Gennaro's miracle was blood's remarkable capacity to traverse from matter to life, to make matter life, and life matter. Blood could be matter without form, and it was capable of being informed life" (Hills, 2016, pp. 92-93).

Color was a central concern. Gennaro's blood, brown and dry like the earth, was distinct from that of Christ, which was consistently fresh, glistening, and red. The miraculous blood of San Gennaro recalls and repositions the divine blood of Christ, shed in sacrifice for humankind (Hills, 2016, pp. 107, 96). Indeed, the miracle of liquefaction invokes the miracle of transubstantiation in the Mass through the handling and raising of Gennaro's blood in the glass ampoules. However, the liquefaction differs from the sacrament precisely in its changeability and visible metamorphosis. Gennaro's blood is mercurial and mysterious, perpetually suspended "in between" two states (Hills, 2016, p. 98). In its transformation from dull



ILL. 4.
Étienne Godefroy, Guillaume de Verdelay, and Milet d'Auxerre: *Reliquary Bust of San Gennaro, with Miter and Cope*, 1304-05, gilt silver, enamel, precious and semi-precious stones. Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro, Naples Cathedral. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

dust to bright liquid, Gennaro's blood transformed from dead to alive. Blood thus collapses temporalities: past, present, and future; birth, life, and death are all conflated in the substance, which tantalizingly oscillates – like melting wax – from brown dust to crimson liquid and back again (Hills, 2016, pp. 108-09).

Gennaro's blood is extraordinary. It apparently defies science and natural laws.⁶ It is the blood of sacrifice, or *cruor* (shed blood), as opposed to *sanguis* (living blood) (Hills, 2016, p. 107). Indeed, as discussed below, bloodshed and lifeblood find a parallel in the story of artistic rivalry in the chapel. Distinct from other corporeal relics whose locations in the body were fixed, blood relics are more ambiguous in their relation to the body, which must be wounded to secrete blood. Specifically, Gennaro's is the blood of martyrdom: arterial blood, spilled at the moment of his decapitation (Carroll, 1989, p. 63). But in its miraculous liquefaction, Gennaro's blood becomes simultaneously *cruor* and *sanguis*, shed and living, within and outside the body (Hills, 2016, pp. 116-17). For historian Caroline Walker Bynum, "the basic dichotomy is not inside versus outside blood but living (which includes inside and outside) blood versus blood that is sick or dead – that is decaying or decayed." Blood, for Bynum, is "not only a symbol of triumph over death and decay; it is also a sign that the immutable changes, the whole divides, and that exactly that change is necessary for salvation." Blood is the sap of sacrifice, which is paradoxical in nature: "life lies in killing, redemption in the shedding of blood" (Bynum, 2007, pp. 168, 152, 192). Gennaro's blood is prophetic and equally paradoxical, alive at the moment of the saint's death, a moment of extreme violence and ultimate redemption (Hills, 2016, pp. 101-02).

Moreover, Gennaro's blood is intimately bound to the lava of Mount Vesuvius. Like the volcano, blood was believed to contain the cosmic elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Solidity *and* fluidity characterize both blood and volcano; the liquefaction of the blood signified Gennaro's intercession and ensured the non-liquefaction of the earth (Hills, 2016, pp. 152-53). But beyond signaling Gennaro's activity in heaven, the fluidity of blood indicated its *animation*: blood was alive, feeling, and active.⁷ Gennaro's blood changed in color and consistency – from dark and cloudy to light and clear – thus simulating the sky during and after eruptions. Change also

involved heat and fire. Gennaro's blood liquified by divine heat. Connected to volcanic activity through his martyrdom at the Solfatara, Gennaro was closely associated with elemental fire. He afforded special protection from Vesuvius, notably after its catastrophic explosion in 1631. The miraculous liquefaction of the saint's blood can be interpreted as material analogy for the volcanic eruption (Hills, 2016, pp. 154, 137). Wonder, stupefaction, marveling, and fear were shared responses to Gennaro's miracle and Vesuvius' fire, the latter variously interpreted as divine intervention, just punishment, or infernal flames. Indeed, anxiety regarding attempts to explain the volcanic and the miraculous further united lava and blood. The metamorphic powers of Vesuvius, which reduced solid rock to molten lava, paralleled the transformational potentiality of Gennaro's blood relic (Hills, 2016, pp. 141, 144). Change thus occurred on multiple levels: the blood morphed from dust to liquid; the volcano transformed from dormant to explosive; the saint evolved from martyr to protector; the city shifted from suffering to saved; and the chapel's visitor converted from worshipper to witness.

Blood Miracle

The problem of seeing, or witnessing, lies at the heart of the miracle of San Gennaro. Etymologically, a "miracle" is an event that produces wonder or marveling, while a "martyr" is a "witness." The miraculous transformation of Gennaro's blood relates to the immutability of the divine versus the changeability of physical matter. Moreover, the making of miracles calls for the unmaking of nature (Hills, 2016, pp. 36, 67-69). The temporality and spatiality of the bloody liquefaction may be set against the daily miracle of the Mass and the apparently miraculous construction and decoration of the Treasury Chapel. Gennaro's miracle differed from miraculous images in Renaissance and Baroque Italy precisely because his blood was not an image, and the miracle occurred with greater regularity than most miracle-working images (Hills, 2016, p. 110).⁸

Beyond its regenerative power, Gennaro's blood revived the city of Naples. The paradoxical nature of blood – living within and separated from the body – was made manifest by the miracle. However, the saint's real miracle was the city's salvation (Hills, 2016, pp. 97, 110). San Gennaro is

central to Naples, and Naples is central to Gennaro. Although temporarily demoted by the Second Vatican Council, which removed his name from the universal calendar of saints in 1964, Gennaro stimulated and strengthened Neapolitan devotion (Lancaster, 2009, p. 7). Supreme of all Neapolitan bloods, Gennaro's is housed by the city of Naples, and his miracle sanctified the city. Naples staged the miracle and thus made Gennaro – bishop of Benevento – Neapolitan; in return, he offered protection and intercession prophetically in the miracle. Gennaro's miracle was unique because it was distinctly Neapolitan and indivisible from Naples (Hills, 2016, pp. 65, 71).

As mentioned above, the miracle of liquefaction occurred when the head and blood relics of San Gennaro were brought into close proximity and in view of each other. Significantly, it was the *sight* of blood by the head, and vice versa, that produced the miracle, which then confirmed the authenticity of the relics. Premature liquefaction was not a promising sign, an admonition of looming disaster. But it also indicated the saint's willingness to shed his blood again. Liquefaction was never guaranteed; it was unpredictable, beyond the control of its witnesses. As much as it stirred emotion and raised anxiety, the blood miracle reassured by liquefying and called for a change of heart or display of contrition in its non-liquefaction (Hills, 2016, pp. 80-83, 89, 108).

The miracle took place in the presence of high and low audiences: the great and the good, as well as the ordinary and the everyday. Indeed, the public staging of the miraculous liquefaction required a wide audience, and the act of witnessing itself called for witnesses (Hills, 2016, p. 190). Miraculous in its non-putrefaction, Gennaro's blood united and divided (Hills, 2013, p. 33). It forged community and above all, it discriminated. Its refusal to liquefy – like drawing blood from a stone – was manifest notably in the face of Muslims, Protestants, foreigners, and heretics. This was hardly casual given the considerable anxiety in seventeenth-century Spain regarding *limpieza de sangre*, or purity of blood (Kamen, 2008, pp. 143-47). This discourse, which emerged in the fifteenth century, concerned the Spanish monarchy's emphasis on purity of blood as especially desirable and devout (Hills, 2016, p. 203). A Spanish colony and the seat of the miracle, Naples was deeply informed by this notion, and Gennaro's blood was ultimately intolerant of outsiders and difference.

Blood Metaphor

Beyond its shifting material properties and miraculous potentialities, blood served as a multivalent metaphor in the Treasury Chapel. For Hills, San Gennaro's miracle "worked on principles similar to a metaphor and was as powerful as one [...] Metaphor and miracle share something paradoxical and uncanny. Their own curious logic is characteristically a form of transgression, of movement, and of slippage" (Hills, 2016, p. 120). Blood was spilled – literally, metaphorically, and anecdotally – over the execution of paintings that adorn the chapel walls. Indeed, one of the greatest controversies of the commission, which played out in fits and starts over many years, revolved around whom the deputies of the chapel should select to design and decorate it: foreigners or locals, outsiders or insiders (Hills, 2016, pp. 12-14; Spear, 1982, pp. 286-90).

Early modern biographical sources set up an intriguing juxtaposition between the execution of bloody subjects by the Spaniard Ribera, and the story of his rivalry with the Bolognese painter Domenichino. These writings point to a curious slippage between the violence within and the violence outside a work of art, complicating the question of where the "authorship" of violence lies, or to whom it may be attributed. As mentioned above, the incident in question concerns the painted decoration of the Treasury Chapel, which comprised frescoes in the dome (Ill. 5), pendentives, and lunettes, and six large altarpieces, painted on copper. Given the supposed "lack" of painterly skill in Naples, the deputies turned elsewhere to contract an artist to fulfill this commission. After having failed to secure the work from the Cavaliere d'Arpino – apparently due to an assault he received from local artists – the deputies appointed Guido Reni in 1620, but he was promptly driven out of town when his servant was wounded by a henchman of the local painter Belisario Corenzio. Consequently, the infuriated deputies decided that no Neapolitan painter or foreign artist then residing in Naples would be allowed to decorate the chapel. Although this ban was soon lifted, Neapolitan resentment towards outside painters persisted, reaching its height when Domenichino was awarded the commission in 1630. The target of both verbal and physical threats, Domenichino fled the hostile atmosphere of Naples in 1634. He returned the following year to continue work on the chapel, however, he died prematurely in



ILL. 5.

Giovanni Lanfranco: *Paradise* (cupola), 1643, fresco; Domenichino: *Scenes from the Life of San Gennaro* (pendentives), 1631-41, fresco. Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro, Naples Cathedral. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

1641, rumored by poison, and ultimately left the decoration incomplete (Wittkower and Wittkower, 1963, pp. 251-52).

Enter Ribera, who, according to his biographers, was allegedly involved in Domenichino's murder. He was commissioned to paint one of the remaining altarpieces, *San Gennaro Emerging Unharmed from the Furnace*, which he signed "hispanus" and dated in 1646 (Ill. 2). On a monumental sheet of copper, Ribera created a pictorial *tour de force*: a mass of

interlocking limbs and figures flung forward, framed by twisting, dancing putti and splashed against a lapis lazuli sky (Ill. 6). San Gennaro emerges – flame-like in appearance – a figure of quiet composure amid the engulfing noise. This explosion of color does not resemble Ribera’s typically somber works. Like the liquefaction of the blood relic, Ribera’s style miraculously metamorphoses. While sight is required to activate the miracle, the blood relic is invisible upon entering the chapel. Similarly, Ribera’s painting is bloodless: no painted blood is required to rival the real blood in this chapel-as-reliquary.

The relationship between Ribera’s art and life, his overtly violent works and his rather obscure personality, has troubled scholars. As art historian James Clifton observes, “The hostility that Domenichino encountered in Naples, especially from Ribera, is noted by no fewer than five biographers: Giovanni Battista Passeri, Gian Pietro Bellori, Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Antonio Palomino, and Bernardo De Dominici” (Clifton, 1995, p. 117).⁹ To this list may be added a further five: André Félibien, Filippo Baldinucci, Pellegrino Antonio Orlandi, Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d’Argenville, and William Stirling.¹⁰ “Needless to say,” Clifton continues, “these sources repeatedly borrow from each other and distort or embellish the stories, and considerable care must be exercised in using them. Nonetheless, the essence of their anecdotes remains remarkably consistent and may be accepted as accurate” (Clifton, 1995, p. 117). The Ribera specialist Gabriele Finaldi concurs that the artist’s supposed sadism can be traced in the early biographies, “particularly in [his] cruel treatment of Domenichino whom he subjected to constant humiliation” (Finaldi, 1995, pp. 267-68, n. 133; Finaldi, 2005, p. 43, n. 24; Finaldi, 2010, p. 80, n. 21). Given the frequent imprecision of biographical material, it is curious that Clifton and Finaldi consider these sources to be an “accurate” form of evidence, taking them more at face value than treating them as critical constructions.¹¹ Although the biographies are consistent in recounting Ribera’s hostility towards Domenichino, this is more because they draw on each other – word for word in the case of Bellori and Baldinucci – and thus should be read with a critical eye. Indeed, the biographical genre played a slippery role in fashioning an image of Ribera as a violent “executioner.”¹² Finaldi connects the invention of Ribera’s violent character with the proliferation of gruesome



ILL. 6.
Jusepe de Ribera: *San Gennaro Emerging Unharmed from the Furnace* (detail), 1646, oil on copper, 355 × 220 cm. Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro, Naples Cathedral. Photo: Scala, Florence.

imagery in his oeuvre. However, as argued elsewhere in this volume, there is an intimate relationship between pain and salvation in Christianity. Violent imagery is fitting within a Christian devotional context, one which is somewhat overlooked in the biographical accounts. In fact, a different face of Ribera is revealed by the Carthusian monks of the Certosa di San Martino, who describe the artist as “a pious person, friendly with the religious, who always behaved with love and generosity toward the Church” (Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa, 1992, p. 5).¹³

One of the earliest critical evaluations of the relationship between Ribera's art and life can be found in the opening pages of a monograph on the artist by the Hispanist Elizabeth du Gué Trapier:

Regarded by past generations as a Spanish Cellini who led a gang of Neapolitan artists famed for threatening their rivals with death or their pictures with ruin, Ribera emerges in the light of recent evidence as a much maligned, if less dramatic person [...] The accusation that he, as a Spaniard, introduced a peculiar ferocity into Italian art has been made often enough; a comparison of his work with that of his French, Flemish, and Italian contemporaries will prove, however, that it is without foundation [...] If such subjects as the flaying of Bartholomew and the crucifixion of Andrew became increasingly popular, the blame must be laid upon the aftereffects of the edict of the Council of Trent rather than upon the temperament of a single Spanish artist. (Trapier, 1952, pp. 3-4)

Here, Trapier underscores the problem of blood, not only in the violent subjects that Ribera depicts, but also in the construction of his nationality as the "blood-thirsty Spaniard."

There is a slippage in the modern historiography between bloody subjects and hot-blooded artists. Clifton is right to point out that the rivalry between Ribera and Domenichino was of a professional nature, rooted in a stylistic and theoretical debate (Clifton, 1995, pp. 113-20). The "Domenichino affair" invites further interpretation: rather than a fantastical tale of bloodshed (*cruor*), the painters were driven by a devotion to art running through their veins (*sanguis*). Indeed, the rift between the two artists may be related to the problem of representing the *affetti*, or the passions. A central preoccupation of seventeenth-century artists was the study of the passions of the soul and their visual expression (McTighe, 2008, p. 239). The classicizing mode articulated by Domenichino privileged idealization, rationality, and decorum, while the realist mode embodied by Ribera, Domenichino's *bête-noire*, channeled bodily experience through the direct observation of nature. Inverting this paradigm, however, Domenichino's harmonious compositions were produced under torturous circumstances for the painter, and Ribera's *San Gennaro* altarpiece does not follow the Caravaggesque tenebrism, or dark manner, of his earlier years, but rather adopts a more luminous palette. In this classicizing work, Ribera took his

cue from the paintings by Giovanni Lanfranco, another rival of Domenichino's, that were already *in situ* in the chapel. Although he endeavored to upstage him, Ribera's classicizing language nevertheless reveals more of an affinity with Domenichino than a disparity, thus complicating Ribera's identity as a realist painter. Resisting a straightforward biographical interpretation, then, the artist's work should be read against the grain of his life, rather than through the lens of biography (Payne, 2018, pp. 15-22). In the context of the Treasury Chapel, such a reading offers a parallel sanctification of Ribera – not Domenichino – as the suffering artist: maligned by posterity and undermined by outsiders.

Furthermore, while the allegedly violent actions of Ribera towards his Bolognese rival might initially appear to confirm the former's "sadistic" nature, Ribera may be regarded as more of a "victim" if he is considered within his contemporary social context. Foreign artists, particularly during the mid-seventeenth century, were extremely mobile and frequently migrated into such urban environments as Naples and Rome. In the early modern world, artists were united in guilds which were designed to keep out foreign competition. Painting was artists' lifeblood (*sanguis*). The potential threat that outsiders posed to the livelihoods of local artists provoked various forms of protectionism, or "anti-foreign labour agitation," which could lead to bloodshed but, nevertheless, did not amount to cruelty for its own sake (Marshall, 2016, pp. 34-39). Ribera became the victim of his own success during his brief residence in Parma, where local artists felt threatened by his noted painterly skills and promptly expelled him from the city (Finaldi, 1995, pp. 45-46; Finaldi, 2011, pp. 18-19).¹⁴ After having established himself in Naples, it may have seemed only natural for Ribera to practice the same method of defense on Domenichino that was performed on him in Parma. Despite his ambivalent role as an outsider/insider, Ribera was one of the leading painters in Naples, and the favoritism he received there was one of the reasons why he never returned to his homeland. In a celebrated conversation in 1625 with the Aragonese painter and theoretician Jusepe Martínez, Ribera was asked why he decided to remain in Naples rather than return to Spain. The artist replied that "Spain is a merciful mother to foreigners but a most cruel stepmother to her own" (Martínez, 1866, p. 34; Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa, 1992, p. 35).¹⁵ Blood is doubly implied in this

familial metaphor, which refers to the criticism that noble Spanish patrons preferred foreigners to native artists. This dynamic of foreignness is further complicated by the activities of the “Cabal of Naples,” which sought to drive away outside competition to protect their lifeblood (Clifton, 1995, p. 128, n. 33). The identity of the “Cabal” itself comprised both foreigners and locals: the Spaniard Ribera, the Greek Corenzio, and the Neapolitan Battistello Caracciolo.

In his 1634 guidebook to Naples, *Il forastiero* (The Foreigner), the municipal secretary Capaccio describes the many foreign inhabitants of the city: Catalans, French, English, Florentines, Venetians, Lombards, Germans, Greeks, Genoese, Spaniards, etc. The presence of such foreigners gave splendor to Naples, yet they were seen as simultaneously enriching and threatening: Vandals, Saxons, Franks, Longobards and other ancient migrant peoples had “blighted every beauty of such a renowned city” (Capaccio, 1634, p. 669).¹⁶ The Treasury Chapel operated as a microcosm of Naples, celebrating foreign artists (by showcasing their work) while endeavoring to keep them out (by staging artistic rivalries). Attitudes towards foreignness and locality were distinct at the time. For Capaccio, the Spanish themselves were “foreign,” although Ribera could inhabit both categories at once. Italy was not yet a unified country, while Spain extended beyond the Iberian Peninsula. Thus, Ribera could become more easily integrated in the local community, whereas for others like Domenichino, it was a matter of life and death. Like the blood of San Gennaro, identity in the Treasury Chapel was at times solid, at times changeable and fluid, complicating notions of blood purity that held sway in the Spanish empire.

Conclusion

Blood animates, thematizes, and problematizes the Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro. Its combined metamorphic materiality, miraculous potentiality, and metaphorical implications resist rational explanation. Held in suspense, Gennaro’s ambiguous blood relic rivals and upstages the paintings and sculptures on view in the sumptuously decorated chapel. Although Lord Byron writes of Ribera that “Spagnoletto tainted his brush with all the blood of all the sainted” (Byron, 1823, xiii, 71), blood is notably absent

from his painting of San Gennaro.¹⁷ This absence of painterly blood points to the paradoxical nature of blood in the chapel context: simultaneously absent and present, veiled and unveiled through the body's porous skin and the reliquary's glass ampoules. The bloodless painting may, in fact, be regarded as part of the architectural reliquary, operating as a visualization of the miraculously present saint. Moreover, the flux and fixity of blood complicate the notion of blood purity, which necessitates immutability. However, transformation lies at the heart of Gennaro's blood miracle. While liquid substances solidify or evaporate, the opposite occurs in the miracle, which involves a continuous metamorphosis, both change and return to a previous state. Ultimately, the blood relic of San Gennaro came to embody the city of Naples as a whole, a universal miracle as divisive as it was reassuring, transcending specific religious orders and factions to protect the city and its inhabitants.

This essay has argued that the various elements of the blood miracle find their counterpart in the decoration of the Treasury Chapel. The suspense in waiting for the miraculous event parallels the long, protracted process of commissioning the chapel's painterly decoration. The disappointment when the blood relic resists liquefaction is echoed in the chagrin of the deputies at the dearth of artistic talent in Naples and the violent conduct of local artists. The bubbling, boiling blood of San Gennaro resonates with the fiery rage of the rivalrous artists. Finally, the miraculous liquefaction of the blood relic is mirrored in the miraculous skill required to execute the paintings that adorn the Treasury Chapel, as well as the awe, stupefaction, and wonder of the visitor-worshipper-witness at their marvelous rendering.

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NOTES

- 1 For a list of regularly liquefying blood relics in Naples, see Carroll, 1989, p. 65, Table 6. For a list of relics in the Treasury Chapel in 1703, see Alfano and Amitrano, 1951, pp. 393-99.
- 2 The blood relics of John the Baptist are split between Santa Maria Donnaromita, San Gregorio Armeno, and San Giovanni Carbonara; Nicholas of Tolentino's are housed at Sant'Agostino; Patricia's are stored at Santa Patrizia; Pantaleon's are located in the "Scodes" reliquary; and Stephen's are conserved at San Gaudioso.
- 3 On the relationship between the natural and the supernatural in the blood miracle of San Gennaro, see De Ceglia, 2014, pp. 133-73; on the double role of the viceroys as spiritual/political intermediaries and shrewd administrators in the struggle to possess Gennaro's relics, see Dauverd, 2020, pp. 103-46; on the wider context concerning the eruption of Vesuvius, namely issues of religious orthodoxy, Counter-Reformation piety, and scientific enquiry, see Everson, 2012, pp. 691-727.
- 4 For a summary of the liquefactions of San Gennaro's blood relic from 1632 to 1860, see Carroll, 1989, p. 60, Table 4.
- 5 See also Hahn, 1997, pp. 20-31.
- 6 For a scientific explanation of the miracle, see Garlaschelli, Ramaccini, and Delia Sala, 1991, p. 507.
- 7 For a recent study of animation focusing on an earlier period, see Jørgensen, Skinnebach, and Laugerud, 2023, esp. pp. 31, 94-95, 107-08, 120, 143, 160-66, 187, 220, 239-41. See also Fricke, 2013, pp. 53-69.
- 8 On miracle-working images, see Garnett and Rosser, 2013. On the relationship between miracles and animation in the medieval period, see Jørgensen, Skinnebach, and Laugerud, 2023, pp. 173-234.
- 9 See Passeri, 1772, p. 38; Bellori, 1672, pp. 216, 340-45; Malvasia, 1678, pp. 333-35; Palomino, 1724, p. 311; and De Dominici, 1743, pp. 7-8, 21.
- 10 See Félibien, 1679, pp. 303-04; Baldinucci, 1702, pp. 350-52; Orlandi, 1719, p. 237; Dezallier d'Argenville, 1762, pp. 232-34; and Stirling, 1848, pp. 744-48.
- 11 On the problematic nature of biographical "evidence," see Perini, 1990, pp. 151-52.
- 12 On the slipperiness of biographies, see McTighe, 2009, p. 145. On the notion of "artist-as-executioner" in relation to Caravaggio, see Stone, 2012, pp. 583-86.
- 13 Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa, 1992, p. 254: "Giuseppe essendo stata persona pia et amica de religiosi et con Chiese procedeva con molta amorevolezza e senza tiratura etanto più che quello per essere Valent' homo lavorava con molta facilità et in pochissimo tempo perfettionava la pittura."
- 14 For the primary sources, see Mancini, 1956, p. 249; Scaramuccia, 1674, p. 174; Malvasia, 1678, p. 333.

- 15 “España es madre piadosa de forasteros y cruelísima madrastra de los
 propios naturales. Yo me hallo en esta ciudad y reino muy admitido y estima-
 do, y pagadas mis obras á toda satisfaccion mia.”
- 16 “[...] queste nationi forastiere, han deturpato ogni bellezza di così illustre città.”
- 17 This line comes from the thirteenth canto, in which Byron describes a pic-
 ture gallery at Norman Abbey: “But ever and anon to soothe your vision, /
 Fatigued with these hereditary glories, / There rose a Carlo Dolce or a Titian
 / Or wilder group of savage Salvatorè’s. / Here danced Albano’s boys, and here
 the sea shone / In Vernet’s ocean lights, and there the stories / Of martyrs
 awed, as Spagnoletto tainted / His brush with all the blood of all the sainted.”

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