

INTRODUCTION

I sing of a maiden
That is matchless . . .
Mother and maiden
Was ne’er none but she;
Well may such a lady
Godes mother be.
—*I Syng of a Mayden*, anonymous
Middle English poem

In the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, at the height of the cult of the Virgin Mary, a rare and rich conflux of past and present events, both authentic and legendary, catapulted Orvieto into the spotlight as a religious, political, and intellectual center. First heresy and political conflict, then popes, prelates, and the occasional king – including Edward I of England in the 1270s and Charles I of France in 1281 – graced the city’s halls and streets. Ritual and ceremony became a way of life. Concurrently, the illustrious churchmen of Orvieto campaigned for a grand new cathedral, begun in 1290, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary to honor the devotion of both the city and the founding pope and adorned with magnificent sculpture, mosaics, alabaster and stained-glass windows, and frescoes.

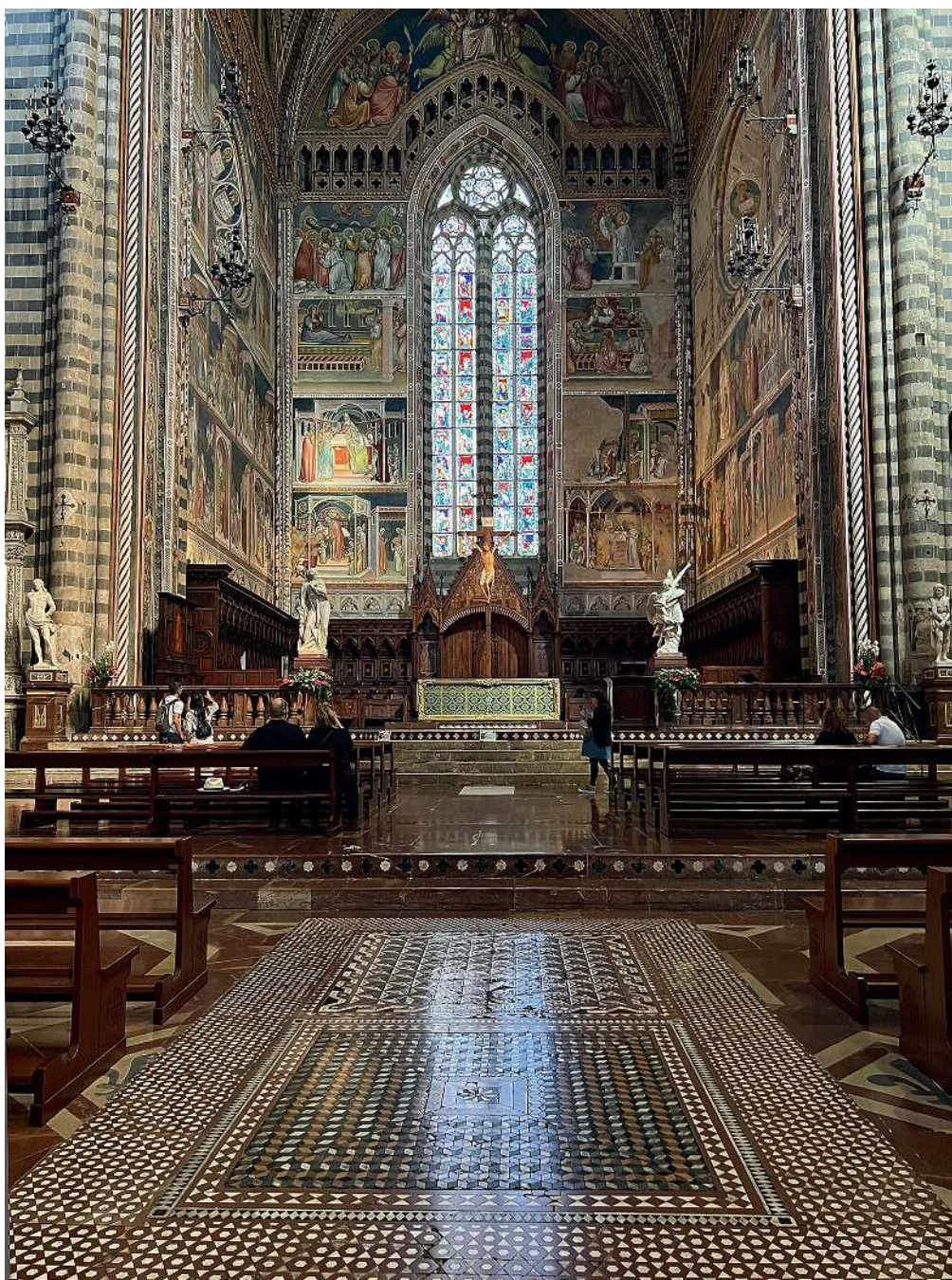
Although Orvieto’s cathedral is one among many contemporary cathedrals dedicated to the Virgin – Siena and Florence, for example – certain aspects stand out as exceptional. First, and perhaps most unusual, the founding pope, Nicholas IV (r. 1288–92), decreed a plan for the building even before he laid its



1.1. Lorenzo Maitani, primary architect and sculptor, west facade and south side of Orvieto Cathedral, c. 1310–30 (photo: author).

cornerstone, which resulted in a cohesive and comprehensive iconography related to earlier programs in Rome and that also reflected aspects of the city's history. Although with a Sienese architect and capomaestro, or head builder, the Orvieto Cathedral resembles that in Siena, the interior at Orvieto is sparer, which immediately draws the viewer's attention to the Marian programs in the Cappella Maggiore, or high chapel, in the tribune. Finally, unlike Siena and Florence, where the cathedrals' facades were completed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or other cities where facades were never finished, the one at Orvieto received priority; it was meant to be seen, proclaiming to all who saw it the history of human salvation, the city's devotion to the Virgin Mary, and, lest we forget, the importance of the city itself (Figure 1.1, 1.4).

Whereas several Orvietan artistic programs, both on the facade and in the interior, have received scholarly attention, no one has previously investigated the two programs in the tribune that most fully express the city's Marian devotion, coupled with the citizen's dogmatic concerns (Figure 1.2). The first program, both Marian and Christological, is the single surviving stained-glass window by Giovanni di Bonino da Assisi (d. 1347), completed, signed, and dated in 1334; the other, fully Marian, to which over half of this text is devoted, is the even more undersung fresco cycle, painted between 1370 and 1384 by local artist



1.2. Lorenzo Maitani, primary architect and sculptor, Cappella Maggiore (tribune), c. 1310–20, and Ugolino di Prete Ilario, The life of the Virgin frescoes, 1370–84, Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto (photo: author).

Ugolino di Prete Ilario (d. c. 1404) and his associates, who, shortly before, had completed a fresco program in the adjacent Cappella del Corporale.¹ A third, shorter Marian mosaic program on the facade, conceived by Sienese capomaestro Lorenzo Maitani (d. 1330) and executed intermittently throughout the fourteenth century, also supports the local devotion to the Virgin, but the present mosaics are modern copies and thus not a major focus of this study.

Several factors have contributed to the scholarly oversight of these Marian programs. Although Orvieto thrived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in 1309, under pressure from the French king, Pope Clement V moved the papal court to Avignon. In the 1420s, the court returned to Rome, ensconced itself at the Vatican, and, except for Pope Clement VII's (r. 1523–34) refuge during the Sack of Rome (1527), popes ceased to occupy Orvieto's hilltop palaces. Moreover, in the early sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation and subsequent Counter-Reformation (or Catholic Reformation) caused a seismic shift in religious power, practices, patronage, and art. While Protestants eschewed images, Roman Catholics largely transferred the emphasis of their art from didactic narratives to single images that promoted Roman doctrine and the sacraments, especially the points with which Protestants disagreed. Along with Orvieto itself, the cathedral's extraordinary artistic programs, and the understanding of them, slowly slipped into obscurity.

CONSERVATION AND AUTHENTICITY OF THE ARTISTIC PROGRAMS IN THE CAPPELLA MAGGIORE

In addition to events in Orvietan history, concerns over the authenticity of these works have hindered scholarly interest in these programs. Some scholars have perceived them as over-restored by later artists and therefore unfaithful to the originals. However, documentary evidence and conservation for the Cappella Maggiore prove otherwise. Luigi Fumi's (d. 1934) monumental work of 1891, *Il Duomo di Orvieto e i suoi restauri*, records contracts, payments to artists, and conservation efforts through the late nineteenth century. Beginning about thirty years ago, art in the Cappella Maggiore, the adjacent Cappella Nuova (now the Cappella San Brizio), and on the facade underwent extensive conservation and study.² Findings regarding the window reveal that although several window panels were repaired, replaced, repainted, and possibly switched, most are original. All but two of the seven replacement panels were documented at their respective installations as faithful to the originals, which means that the style of thirty-eight of the forty-four rectangular panels is autograph. While questions may linger, the window remains mostly as the artist intended and the iconography is intact.

Ugolino's frescoes also underwent restoration – the Cappella del Corporale far more aggressively than the Cappella Maggiore. Whereas the north and northeast walls of the Cappella Maggiore escaped moisture damage, parts of the south and southeast walls did not. Documents of the 1490s note that

Pinturicchio (d. 1513) repainted the moisture-damaged upper south wall, where stylistic changes are glaringly evident, but the subject matter remained true. In the late 1490s, Piermatteo d'Amelia (d. c. 1503/8), who decorated the original Sistine Chapel ceiling in the 1480s, and Il Pastura (Antonio del Massaro da Viterbo, d. c. 1516), who worked at Spoleto with Fra Filippo Lippi, repaired and/or repainted some of narrative compositions in the southeast corner and on the south wall but kept them faithful to Ugolino's style, as the Opera del Duomo, the lay governing board of the cathedral, requested.³ Fumi notes that during the 1845 cleaning of the frescoes, the treasurer, in consultation with restorers, decided to use only a sponge and water because "it is better to have the old paintings again, and not a mixture of the old and the new, which would cause these paintings to lose their original appearance."⁴ Even Z. A. Cox, who disparages Ugolino's frescoes in the cathedral, states that "in spite of the many hands involved, the overall compositional format remained the same; indicating that Ugolino's original plan for the frescoes was followed throughout, for the sake of unity."⁵

The most recent, most thorough, and least invasive conservation dates to 1992–99, supervised by Giusi Testa, supports Cox's assessment. Her book on the cathedral and articles by several authors in the local journal *De Fabbrica: Laboratorio per il restauro di complessi monumentali* confirm that heavy fifteenth-century repainting occurred only on the upper south wall. They also note that although fifteenth-century artists retouched a few narrative paintings on the southeast wall, they retain Ugolino's spirit.⁶ Thus, like frescoes of many other fourteenth-century artists, most of the murals show some surface abrasion and loss of some of their once more brilliant coloring and secco refinements, the program is complete and mostly reflects the artist's autograph style. In fact, after the recent conservation began, scholars noted that the frescoes had become more vivid and more legible. They came to appreciate Ugolino's genius in expression and narration, as unfolds in greater detail in later chapters, but no one circulated their opinions beyond local publications.⁷

The conservation reports and related publications between 1994 and 2003 brought merited attention to the Cappella Nuova, where, in 1447, Fra Angelico (d. 1455) began a Last Judgment that Luca Signorelli (d. 1523) completed between 1499 and 1504.⁸ Concurrently, Dominique Surh and Catherine Harding brought deserved attention to Ugolino di Prete Ilario's long-overlooked frescoes of miraculous Masses and feedings in the Cappella del Corporale (1357–64) in the north transept.⁹ Meanwhile, the Marian programs in the highly visible Capella Maggiore remained in obscurity until now.

THE FOUNDING POPE'S PLAN

The story of the cathedral begins with the founding pope, Nicholas IV, who, in a highly unusual measure, decreed that the cathedral should follow the

“principle vocabulary” of the basilica of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome.¹⁰ Although scholars have cited the opening section of the decree, a fuller reading of the document shows that the pope’s intentions were broader than previously realized and implies that someone or some group of people – probably theological scholars – understood the pope’s intentions, carried his plan forward, and helped conceive the artistic programs. Since contracts rarely address the subject, meaning, or purpose of the art, little is known of the late medieval artistic thought process other than what can be gleaned from the finished artworks, patterns of patronage, artistic traditions, documents, texts, literary traditions, and the surrounding circumstances.¹¹ This book examines these issues and who might have carried the ideas forward.

Nicholas, the first Franciscan pope, like his mentor St. Francis, the founder of his order, held deep devotion to the Virgin Mary. He also avidly patronized the arts, first at Assisi, where scholars credit him with masterminding fresco programs, and later at venerable basilicas in Rome. His favorite Roman church was S. Maria Maggiore, where he sponsored a Marian program. Also, during his pontificate, the Marian imagery at the Church of S. Maria in Trastevere in Rome was expanded into a narrative. Seldom noticed until now, the artistic programs in the Cappella Maggiore not only benefited from these stylistic and iconographic examples, but also, they shared the overriding themes of the Incarnation and Mary as the life-giving instrument in God’s plan for the redemption of humankind, but on a grander scale and with more proactive holy parents.

THE SUBJECT AND THE APPROACH

In compliance with the city’s and the founding pope’s devotion to the Virgin Mary, the artistic programs in the Cappella Maggiore comprise a tour de force of Marian devotion, artistry, and compelling narrative. When each program was complete, it gave the most comprehensive monumental narrative to date of the life of the Virgin, outnumbering the episodes in the Marian mosaic programs in Rome, the apse frescoes at Assisi by Cimabue (d. 1302), the lost frescoes of Mary’s youth on the facade of Spedale of S. Maria della Scala (c. 1335) in Siena by brothers Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti (d. 1348) – and perhaps Simone Martini (d. 1344), the architrave above the central doorway of the Siena Cathedral (1300–10), and the program in the Baroncelli Chapel of the Church of S. Croce in Florence (c. 1330) by Taddeo Gaddi (d. 1366). Both programs also exceed the number of Marian scenes in the Christological cycles by Giotto di Bondone (d. 1337) in the Arena Chapel (Cappella Scrovegni) at Padua (c. 1303–5), Duccio di Buoninsegna (d. c. 1319) in his *Maestà* altarpiece for the Siena Cathedral, and Lorenzo Maitani on the facade at Orvieto (c. 1310–30), where Mary’s life is a prelude to Jesus’s. Ugolino’s program, however, like those in Rome, Assisi, and Siena, includes her death and

queenship in heaven, but with additional episodes, and maintains the incarnational theme.

The two narrative programs in the Cappella Maggiore, like most other large artistic programs, offer more than a storyline; within these details lies much of their richness. Both programs acknowledge the city's unique spiritual and dogmatic concerns, shaped by its tumultuous history and subsequent rise to prominence as a papal stronghold and mendicant enclave, with a papally sanctioned feast and related cult inspired by an alleged miraculous Mass – previously unnoticed features that deserve exploring. Although scholars have recognized that Giovanni di Bonino's window is among the oldest and most beautiful medieval stained-glass windows in Italy, no one has delved deeply into the iconography. Moreover, once at Orvieto, Giovanni breaks out of his mold of mainly depicting regimented saints and shows tremendous creativity by designing naturalistic narrative scenes with spatial depth. Likewise, scholars have deemed Ugolino di Prete Ilario's paintings lackluster and conventional – misperceptions that have contributed to their oversight. In fact, his unpretentious, Sieneese-style deceived one scholar into belittling the paintings as of "limited interest," while another disparaged them as "discursive and anecdotal."¹² Although scholars have regarded his compositions as conventional, Ugolino actually is among the first artists to abandon the Sieneese custom of emulating earlier prototypes and reimagines traditional compositions so that they incorporate more narrative. His inventive spirit also emerges in his designs for newly portrayed events. Finally, the previously unnoticed, meaningful juxtapositions of scenes in both programs show the power of rhetoric turned into engaging visual language.

Although the artists' portrayals of Mary conform to fourteenth-century female gender roles, this study reveals that they push those boundaries. Rather than portray her as stately, stoic, and detached, they emphasize her human qualities – her vitality, her perceptiveness, and her varied emotions, which range from dutiful to determined, embarrassed, amazed, and tender. Moreover, whereas Giovanni di Bonino's narrative shifts to the adult life of Christ in the last three scenes, Ugolino's longer program focuses solely on Mary from conception through her death and coronation in heaven. In the process, he traces her deepening spiritual life. He not only shows Mary willingly serving as God's vessel, but also, he portrays her as gently assertive and actively collaborating in God's plan. In another unusual turn, Ugolino also acknowledges the liturgical year by including all Marian and infancy feasts and events – some of which rarely appear elsewhere – as well as the feasts that celebrate post-resurrection events for which she was present and that were foundational for the establishment of the church. He also acknowledges the church universal including saints, prophets, evangelists, and church fathers.

Equally overlooked until now, Giovanni and Ugolino give unprecedented attention to the vital role of Mary's all-too-often marginalized spouse, Joseph, which, in turn, reveals an earlier than previously realized onset of Josephine devotion in Orvieto. Unlike their predecessors, such as Giotto, Maitani, and Taddeo Gaddi, who place Joseph on the sidelines – if they include him at all – Giovanni and Ugolino place him at the center of the action. Furthermore, both artists include several new events. Three of Giovanni's and all Ugolino's novel episodes include Joseph and portray him as the key protagonist. Ugolino also may be the first artist to subtly show both Mary and Joseph aware of Jesus's fate and complicit in God's plan.

Moreover, neither Giovanni nor Ugolino was an exception to the predilection of the Opera del Duomo for engaging the best artists in central Italy. Each artist's work represents the best in their respective media for both artistry and iconography of their generation in central Italy, as well as the artist's masterpiece. Such success causes one to wonder what in the intellectual and cultural environment in Orvieto so stimulated the artists' imaginations – hence, the need to explore the city's history and determine who might have lived there or at least passed through its ancient gates. Moreover, as will unfold in subsequent chapters, in addition to recounting the stories, these programs, with iconographic complexities and moral lessons imbedded in the narratives – especially the frescoes – were designed for lengthy contemplation, which brings us to another problem.

CONTEXT MATTERS

Since the fourteenth century, the physical surroundings and configurations inside the Orvieto Cathedral have changed significantly, which hinders how modern viewers see and understand the art. Originally, a freestanding wooden choir enclosing the high altar and the pulpit stood at the head of the nave between the two easternmost pairs of piers (Figure 4.1). Its form and placement resembled that at Siena – also later removed – and the still-intact marble fixtures at venerable Roman churches, such as S. Sabina (432), S. Maria in Cosmedin (c. 790), and S. Clemente (c. 1100). A remaining portion of the original floor (Figure 1.2), designed by Giacomo di Cosmati of Rome, marks its location, and resembles Cosmati pavements at S. Maria Maggiore, S. Maria in Trastevere, S. Maria in Cosmedin, and S. Clemente.¹³

Function has also changed. The Cappella Maggiore, located in the tribune, five steps above the transept crossing, originally served as a public chapel, away from pilgrim traffic and routine services. However, at the onset of the Counter-Reformation, Pope Paul III (r. 1534–49) instituted worship reforms that brought more attention to the drama of the Mass and the accompanying miracle of transubstantiation – dogma that Protestants rejected. In 1537,

motivated by these reforms, the pope decreed that the high altar, pulpit, and choir stalls be moved to the tribune for greater visibility of the Mass.¹⁴ Therefore, the chapel was transformed into a chancel, a move that reduced access to art intended for public enlightenment and reflection.

To compound the loss, unlike single painted images, narrative fresco programs were conceived as environments – panoramic and enfolding, much like modern installation art, which offers a distinctive form of storytelling. Moreover, carefully arranged stacked and facing compositions meaningfully correspond. Rather than to be gazed upon, the all-encompassing arrangement, with significant pairings, invites the viewers to immerse themselves in the experience of the story, to imagine that they are participants in, and witness to, the events pictured – purposes that the trecento viewers innately understood. In fact, fourteenth-century devotional manuals not only illustrate notable pairings, but they also encourage viewers to identify with the holy figures and to contemplate religious images to the point that they feel they are part of the story.¹⁵ Such devotional practices require access and time – but today, the chapel-turned-chancel is roped off as a sanctuary. Except during services, the only light enters through the stained-glass windows; therefore, the audience for whom the art was intended can only view the art dimly and from afar. Consequently, most visitors give the works only a cursory glance, missing the details, the layers of richness, and the experience of engagement with the art. Over the thirty years since Ugolino’s Marian paintings first captured my attention, only once did a gracious priest permit me to sit in the choir stalls, which allowed me to see the subtleties and juxtapositions. I also discovered compositions visible only from inside, which enabled me to draw new conclusions that I share here. The complex iconography, pairings, and theological agendas not only merit explanation, but to fully appreciate them, they also require a good deal of backstory, which follows in succeeding chapters. The threads come together in remarkable ways.

SCHOLARLY RECEPTION OF ORVIETO’S MARIAN PROGRAMS

The responses of the earliest critics of the window and the frescoes, some recorded before any conservation took place, offer insight into their original appearance and their early reception. The first recorded notice of the frescoes came in 1568, from Giorgio Vasari (d. 1574), a noteworthy painter and architect, and the first critic and biographer of Italian artists. In the second edition of his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, he wrote that “in Orvieto he painted in fresco the principal Chapel of S. Maria,” and “[the artist] showed beautiful and great invention in grouping and placing his figures thoughtfully in historical scenes.” He concluded his high praise of the artist with “how great, both in judgment and in genius, was his worth in the

art of painting.”¹⁶ Relying on his acutely trained eye, stylistic analysis, and oral tradition, Vasari misattributed the paintings to Ambrogio Lorenzetti, the highly revered, slightly earlier, Sienese master artist who probably trained Ugolino. Ugolino’s Marian frescoes do indeed echo Ambrogio’s earthy vitality and charming vernacular style – perhaps they reflected the style and compositional formats of his and his brother Pietro’s lost frescoes on the Spedale of S. Maria della Scala. In fact, Vasari’s familiarity with these frescoes might have caused him to misattribute the Orvietan frescoes to Ambrogio. However, an Orvietan document of May 30, 1370, and subsequent ones through 1384, prove him mistaken. With no mention of either an Ambrogio or a Lorenzetti, documents record that the Opera del Duomo commissioned local artist Ugolino di Prete Ilario to paint the “chapel above the high altar” – a decision they made without hesitation – and, following common practice, without record of the subject matter.¹⁷

Equally significant, and less noticed by scholars, is Vasari’s misattribution of Ugolino’s prior decoration of the Cappella del Corporale to another renowned master, Roman artist Pietro Cavallini (d. c. 1330).¹⁸ Cavallini is probably among the early painters, along with Florentine artists Cimabue (d. 1302) and Giotto and his associates, and later, Sienese artists Pietro Lorenzetti and Simone Martini, to work at the Basilica of S. Francesco in Assisi, where their contributions to the development of the new naturalism in late medieval Italian painting are most evident. In Rome, moreover, Cavallini designed and executed mosaics for the church of S. Maria in Trastevere and frescoes for the church of S. Cecilia in Trastevere. He was probably among the Roman artists who embellished the papal palaces at Orvieto for Pope Nicholas IV.¹⁹ If either of Vasari’s attributions had been correct, scholars would have pored over these frescoes long ago. However, Vasari’s opinions still matter, as they firmly attest to the positive reception of the paintings – their quality, inventiveness, and sophistication – and the talent of the artist.

Not until the eighteenth century do documents mention the cathedral decoration again, and then by local scholars: first, in a manuscript by Gerolamo Clementini, and soon after, in the first published history of the cathedral by Franciscan friar Guglielmo della Valle (d. 1794).²⁰ Especially valuable are the works of several nineteenth-century authors, who recount the cathedral’s history and transcribe parts of three sets of documents that extend back, almost uninterrupted, to at least the 1280s, sometimes with imprecise Latin or Italian grammar. Among the earliest authors is Lodovico Luzi, who misattributes the window to Fra Antonio di Orvieto and gives only cursory mention of Ugolino’s frescoes.²¹ Later, Luigi Fumi corrects Luzi’s attribution for the window, but like Luzi, he dismisses the Marian cycles. Fumi includes more documents, details of builders and artists, and notes damage done in restorative interventions, all of which help scholars evaluate