The Matriarchal Nimbus: Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger's *The Holy Kinship*

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ABSTRACT

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In *The Holy Kinship* (1500-1510), the artist Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger defies convention by portraying the importance of matriarchy, via the semiotics of the nimbus. Within Christian art, the nimbus has been widely used as a signifier of divinity. Saints and angels, as well as members of the Holy Family, are often depicted nimbed in the history of art. In particular, men of divine status are frequently nimbed, as Christianity was predominantly patriarchal. However, there are several cases in which women are also represented with this divine signifier. One work in which the nimbus as a signifier of matriarchal status and lineage is epitomized is Gutrecht's portrayal of *The Holy Kinship*, in which the women, but not the men, are shown nimbed. This thesis explores the varied significance of the matriarchal nimbus. Furthermore, it challenges traditional patriarchal analyses of late medieval, German culture in order to examine how this altarpiece both reflects and constructs attitudes regarding a celebration of women’s spiritual and secular roles. In this way, the painting presents a direct challenge to the more familiar representation of patriarchal lineage and power in Tree of Jesse images.

Keywords: Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger, nimbus, matriarchy, patriarchy, semiotics
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Introduction

Since its origins in the early third century AD, Early Christian art has maintained a foundational status as the most important and significant contributor of religious iconography. It is within Early Christian art that the origins of the nimbus more commonly known as the halo are first seen. The nimbus has remained a major symbol within religious iconography ever since. It can be defined as a circular orb of light that emanates from behind the head of a saint or celestial being. Just as the definition declares, the purpose of a nimbus was to designate divine status. Commonly, saints and angels as well as members of the Holy Family, are depicted nimbed. As the Christian faith was largely under patriarchal rule, men of divine status are frequently portrayed nimbed. However, there are cases in which women are also shown nimbed. While it is commonly accepted that the nimbus or halo represents divinity, it was also used in art to signify royalty. In either case, the nimbus was utilized to designate status. While the nimbus serves to designate divinity and royalty alike, it also has variants in color. One work in particular in which the issue of colored nimbi emerges is The Holy Kinship 1500-1510, by Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger (Fig. 1).¹ This particular painting is unusual, as the women are nimbed while the men are not. Its nimbi also vary in color, a depiction unique to the typical usage in Holy Kinship paintings. In this particular painting one does not find the ordinary golden nimbus but rather an array of red nimbi offset by a singular green nimbus. The rare use of color application to the nimbi gives further significance to those adorned by it—in particular the females within the painting. Gutrecht’s painting was created at the height of what is frequently considered to be a very patriarchal moment in German history. Thus, this thesis will discuss the keenly significant

matriarchal significations of the nimbi found in this painting, and it will suggest possibilities for subversion to traditional patriarchal rule via the nimbi.

It is primarily the nimbi found in this particular Holy Kinship scene that are the source of inquiry of this paper. After an introduction to the Holy Kinship theme generally, this paper will focus on the origins of the nimbus in art and the significance of color related to the nimbus. Second, it will focus on and investigate the nimbus via semiotic analysis and its specific meaning in relation to the women depicted in Gutrecht’s *The Holy Kinship*. It will examine feminist theory in connection with the artist’s decision to portray the women of the painting, but not the men, with halos, as well as his choice to prominently and powerfully depict the women of the painting. In an investigation of the cultural context of this work, *The Holy Kinship* emerges as a rare example of matriarchal influence and hegemony.

**The Holy Kinship**

It is known that *The Holy Kinship* was created in Konstanz Germany for the purpose of an altarpiece. It is unknown where the altarpiece was originally located or who commissioned it. There are records that suggest that during the time that Gutrecht was working on it, he is reported to have been working at a Minister church in Constance.² The altarpiece originally consisted of two panels, *The Holy Kinship* juxtaposed with a depiction of the Tree of Jesse on the reverse side.³ Gutrecht’s *The Holy Kinship*, following standards of the time, compositionally directs attention to the prominent central grouping of Mary, the Christ child, and Anne, Mary’s mother.

² Sylvia C. Weber, *Old Masters in the Würth Collection: The Former Fürstlich Fürstenberg Collection of Paintings*, Swiridoff, the University of Michigan, 2004, 300 “He was a painter of murals and panels. He trained under his father Matthäus Gutrecht the Elder (died 1505). From 1506 onwards he worked notably on the cathedral chapter and Minister church in Constance, painting the housing and wings of the organ.”
Other relatives of import are featured such as Mary’s two sisters and the spouses. It is interesting to note that the women are located towards the front while the men occupy the space in the background. The setting is indicative of a domestic interior space noted by the use of a tile floor and a potted plant. As previously noted, the women and children in *The Holy Kinship* are nimbed while the men are not. Given the nature of altarpieces and the subject matter, it is likely that *The Holy Kinship* would have been located in the front of a chapel. If this was the case, then some hypotheses about the audience for the work can be made. Facing the congregation, the altarpiece would have been visible to male and female worshippers alike. Nevertheless, I would contend that the kinship scene was primarily directed towards, and for the benefit of, a female audience due to its focus on matriarchy and their sacred progeny. The adjacent *Tree of Jesse* scene, I would suggest, was in parallel fashion likely directed toward the male worshippers. In this manner, both genders would have been provided virtuous role models on whom to fashion their own lives as spouses and parents.

The Holy Kinship had long been a common scene popular among German artists. It was even given a name in German, ‘Anna Selbdritt’ and in Dutch ‘Anna te Drieen,’ that unfortunately have no English equivalent. However, it essentially indicates a ‘large family grouping’ of St. Anne. Developing from an interest in Christ's immediate family, the Holy Kinship, also known as the family of Saint Anne, became popular in the late fifteenth century. Often the scenes include Mary, the Christ child, and St. Anne, sometimes accompanied by their relatives. According to manuscript scholar Anne Rudloff Stanton, Holy Kinship scenes focus on:

鞣St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin, and her three marriages (the Trinubium Annae). Each marriage produces one daughter, each named Mary, and these daughters in turn bear Christ and five of his apostles. Thus the immediate family of

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Christ, and the first group affected by his ministry, is formed by a genealogy traced not through fathers, but through mothers.⁵

The earliest Holy Kinship images, emerging during the late thirteenth century, follow after this pattern depicting Christ’s immediate family. Over time these depictions vary based on the artist’s preference.

Finding its origins in the middle of the thirteenth century, the Holy Kinship often mirrors the explication found in the Golden Legend (1260 AD), describing the three marriages of St. Anne in which with each marriage Anne bore a daughter named Mary.⁶ The first was the Virgin Mary with Joachim; next Anne married Cleophas to which a daughter Mary Cleophas was born. The third marriage was to Salomas, in which Anne gave birth to Mary Salome. Each of the daughters gave birth to sons, comprised of several of the apostles of Christ. Mary Cleophas married Alphaeus and bore four sons: S. James the Less, Simon, and Jude, all of which were apostles, and S. Joseph the Just. Mary Salome married a man by the name of Zebedee and bore S. James the Great, and S. John the Evangelist.

Due to variations in holy kinship representations and a lack of inscriptions in Gutrecht’s painting, it is nevertheless evident that, in addition to Mary, St. Anne, and the Christ child, various other relatives are included (Fig. 1). One can ascertain that the males situated above Mary, Anne, and the Christ child would reasonably be Joseph, God the Father, and the dove representing the Holy Ghost.⁷ Joseph can be identified by the cane he holds, while God the Father is depicted with white hair and a long white beard following conventions of the time.

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Presumably the Virgin Mary's two younger half-sisters, Mary Cleophae and Mary Salome, from Anne's second and third marriages, are located to the sides of the central Mary, and Anne, and Christ grouping. Seated to the left of the Virgin Mary would be her younger sister Mary Salome along with her two sons John the Evangelist and S. James. Next to her is likely Ismeria, Anne’s sister, who was often represented in earlier depictions of Holy Kinship scenes. Since Anne’s parents Stollanus and Emerentia were often included in Holy Kinship representations, it is thought that they are depicted behind Ismeria. Next to Emerentia would be Zebedee, husband to Mary Salome. Compositionally to the right of Anne is presumed to be Elizabeth holding her son, John the Baptist. Directly behind Anne is her husband Joachim who stands next to Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband. Located next to Elizabeth is Mary Cleophae with her four children as mentioned and her husband Alphaeus situated behind her. It is important at this point in time we begin to see the inclusion of certain figures such as Elizabeth, and Anne's parents and sister.

With late Medieval northern art one can note the inclusion of Saint Elizabeth, cousin to Mary, in such scenes. She was included as contemporary literature began to acknowledge this relationship. It is probable that one of these female figures in Gutrecht’s *The Holy Kinship* is a depiction of Elizabeth with her son John the Baptist and her husband in the background. Without an inscription, the other figures cannot be identified. It is presumed that Saint John the Evangelist and Saint James are also depicted in this scene. However, German artists during the

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10 While other scholars (Philadelphia Museum of Art) attribute Joachim as located above the grouping next to Joseph, I contest that, that figure is rather God the Father and Joachim is located below and behind Anne. This is signified by his embrace on Anne’s shoulder.
12 In Geertgen tot Sint Jans *Holy Kinship* c. 1495 as well as other Holy Kinship scenes produced by his workshop (ca. 1495) St. Elizabeth and her son John the Baptist are now included into the composition.
sixteenth century were known to add in saints that correlated to the location or extra figures to serve as fillers. Thereby, without any written evidence providing clarification, the identification of certain figures, particularly the men, can only be speculated.

Development of the Holy Kinship image emphasized genealogical ties that bridged the New Testament and the Old Testament gospels. In doing so, this created a lineage of recognizable names that linked the gospels together. The Holy Kinship theme appeared at a time when an interest in lineages was commonplace—one in particular being the Tree of Jesse (Fig. 2). Stemming from the prophecy of Isaiah found in the Bible, it is recorded, “that a Messiah would come from the family of the patriarch Jesse, the father of David.” The Tree of Jesse consisted of Christ's family tree, naturally including the Virgin Mary. The Tree of Jesse was considered to be, “an allegorical interpretation of the royal genealogy of Christ.” During the thirteenth century, the Tree of Jesse became a rather popular theme and thus the promotion of the male lineage developed. John Bossy explains that, in order to show, “that Christ was a real man,...it was necessary to know that he was someone with human kin.” To verify Christ as an historical figure it was necessary to have documented proof of his ancestry. So much focus was placed on the male lineage that inevitably, Mary, the once central figure, was relegated to a secondary place.

It is interesting to note, from the twelfth century on, we first see the emergence of depictions of the Holy Kinship providing an emphasis on matriarchy. However, they are more

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13 Pamela Sheingorn and Carol Neel, Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household and Children (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 274.
15 Pamela Sheingorn and Carol Neel, Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household and Children (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 273. Anne Rudloff Stanton, The Queen Mary Psalter: A Study of Affect and Audience. Vol 91, part 6. American Philosophical Society, 2001. Anne Rudloff Stanton also notes that while images of the Tree of Jesse were found in all media, they were more popular in illuminated manuscripts during the thirteenth century.
16 Ibid, 280.
prevalent towards the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in manuscripts as well as altar paintings.\textsuperscript{17} Such scenes appeared at a time when there was a preference for patriarchy.\textsuperscript{18} Pamela Sheingorn notes that, “It is in this context that Holy Kinship diagrams tracing Christ's ancestry to Saint Anne first appear, and it is because of this context that it is tempting to read such diagrams as conscious rebuttals of the patriarchal Tree of Jesse.”\textsuperscript{19} Hence, Sheingorn argues that artists were appropriating the Holy Kinship as a means of providing an alternate emphasis on matriarchy.\textsuperscript{20} Gutrecht particularly focuses on this idea through the use of haloes that only surround the women of the painting. The original altarpiece to which this panel was attached contained a depiction of the Tree of Jesse on the opposing side. In doing so, through the representation of Christ’s secular lineage (Tree of Jesse) in comparison with his spiritual lineage (Holy Kinship), Gutrecht establishes a sense of equality between the two as both are integral to Christ’s genealogy, while maintaining emphasis on the spiritual. Sheingorn, in congruence with other scholars, argues that Holy Kinship scenes attempted to redirect medieval religious focus to matriarchy by juxtaposing Tree of Jesse images with Holy Kinship scenes.\textsuperscript{21} However, detailed analysis beyond broad suggestions has yet to be offered. This paper highlights the importance of an additional semiotic analysis of Gutrecht’s painting. I use the previously identified matriarchal theme as a basis for further inquiry into new articulations of matriarchal power and a de-emphasis on patriarchal power in order to enhance the appeal for female viewers. By using this thesis as a basis, along with further evidence, I argue that the use of the nimbus and color symbolism in Gutrecht’s painting particularly set it apart from the traditional patriarchal view of many German Renaissance artists.

\textsuperscript{17} ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid, 274.
\textsuperscript{19} ibid, 275.
\textsuperscript{20} ibid, 274.
\textsuperscript{21} ibid.
During the sixteenth century it was common practice to promote religious female figures as role models for women. Historian Ann Rudloff Stanton informs: “Authorities spanning the medieval period instructed women to look to the Bible for female models to follow or anti-models to avoid.” More often than not, the favored figure was the Virgin Mary. In *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, Stanton examines the British Queen Mary Psalter (1310) as evidence of a device utilized to serve as a role model for a female audience. In the case of the Queen Mary Psalter, it is believed that female patrons commissioned it. Stanton notes that in the various scenes depicted, “The most positive characters are almost always mothers.” She further points out that while the narratives focus on scenes from Genesis and family matters, “...the designer of the Queen Mary Psalter preface took extra care to emphasize the actions of women wherever possible.” This gives credence to the premise that *The Holy Kinship* would also have been directed primarily towards a female audience with its focus on matriliny and the import of mothers.

*The Holy Kinship* shares key stylistic elements with the Queen Mary Psalter in regards to subject matter. Within the Queen Mary Psalter, both the Tree of Jesse and Holy Kinship are depicted on facing pages (Fig. 2). Stanton remarks that while Tree of Jesse scenes are common among English Gothic psalters, it is rare to find a Holy Kinship representation. In the Queen Mary Psalter, the Tree of Jesse image is rendered on one page with its counterpart, the Holy Kinship on the adjacent page. This juxtaposition is also found in Gutrecht's altarpiece. An arrangement such as this is not commonly found in works by contemporaries of Gutrecht.

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23 Ibid 175.
24 Ibid 177.
working in Germany. Its only relation to those using a similar pairing are found in works which predate it. One of the only other manuscripts to create such a juxtaposition is found in the Imola Psalter, ca. 1210. Pamela Sheingorn discusses the deliberate placing of the two scenes next to one another:

The Imola Psalter and the Queen Mary Psalter- that juxtapose such a clearly female genealogy with the patriarchal Tree of Jesse by placing the two genealogies on consecutive or facing pages seem thereby to issue a particularly clear challenge to the supremacy of the male descent.

Gutrecht’s painting is created during a time when there was an interest in lineages. However, it has been assumed that a shift from the bilineal to the more agnatic took place during the Middle Ages in which more emphasis was placed on the male lineage in terms of social attitudes of the time. Thus, Gutrecht appears to be subverting this trend towards patriarchy.

The general shift from a bilineal lineage to agnatic, highly favored patriarchy. From the time of the fall of the Roman Empire up to the beginning of the twelfth century, historians have generally agreed that kinship systems were patterned after a bilineal structure. During the twelfth century this shifted, and emphasis was instead placed upon patrilineage. As a result, the position of women was affected. Women’s roles were centered on their ability to produce a male heir in order to carry on the patriarchal line, while the matriarchal line became secondary. At a time when such attitudes were being practiced in the north, it is interesting that there was

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26 Ibid 184. The only manuscript other than London, BL ms Royal 2 B.vii to juxtapose a Jesse Tree with a Holy Kinship.
30 Ibid 203.
still a demand for Holy Kinship scenes in Germany. Thus, while this shift to patrilineage was emphasized during the High Middle Ages in the theology, the value of ‘matrilineal connections’ were still of importance in religious art.\textsuperscript{32} Similar to the Imola and Queen Mary Psalters, it is evident that representing both the patriarchal and matriarchal line of Christ's family was of importance to female patrons.\textsuperscript{33} Since psalters such as these, especially their Holy Kinship scenes, often served as role models for women at the time, it would stand to reason that the side by side juxtaposition was to reinforce the importance of the female role within the family. It is apparent that in doing so, women's ability to continue the genealogical line was represented as being of critical importance, and such a realization inevitably gave women power and status within the family structure.

The matriarchal representation within Holy Kinship scenes is in direct opposition to patriarchy. It can be presumed that with only the patriarchal lineage being represented, perhaps some felt it necessary to give the alternative view and represent the matriarchal—especially since Mary was so important as parent and mother of Christ. The direct opposition to the patriarchal representation of the Tree of Jesse represents a challenge to patriarchy by the highly matriarchal representation of the Holy Kinship. It emphasizes the importance of the female role as mother and progenitor of male saints, illustrating the shift during the late Middle Ages to the beginning of the sixteenth century towards the glorification of motherhood among women worshippers. Sheingorn makes an interesting observation that the Holy Kinship also served as a type of ‘matrilineal Trinity’ as it focused on the Virgin, the Christ child, and Anne, thus elevating Anne

\textsuperscript{32} Pamela Sheingorn and Carol Neel, \textit{Medieval Families: Perspectives On Marriage, Household and Children} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 8.
\textsuperscript{33} ibid 9. With the rise of the cult of the virgin their was a shift of interest in Mary’s matrilineage.
to the position of God the Father. A further indicator of this is the dove seen hovering above the grouping in Gutrecht’s *The Holy Kinship*. The dove was often shown in scenes of God the Father, and God the Son in order to indicate the Holy Spirit and the completion of the Trinity. To this effect John Oliver Hand notes in relationship to the Holy Kinship, “The implication is that the grouping of Anne, Virgin, and Child is equal to and as sanctified as the more traditional triumvirate of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” This furthers the matriarchal power of the women in *The Holy Kinship*, and gives a stronger bond and unity to the family unit. It is important to note that the grouping of God the Father, Joseph, and the dove creates a patriarchal trinity just above the matrilineal trinity—thus creating a double trinity. The male trinity above serves as a further identifier of the one below, because God the Father points to Joseph, giving him import, who in turn points his finger in the direction of Anne, noting her significance as progenitor of the line. Hence, there is a sense of equality among the two groups. The linking between Anne and God particularly gives significance to her role as important matriarch. Such an emphasis provides an alternative view to the common patriarchy of the Tree of Jesse scene. The Holy Kinship developed into a representation of the relationship between women, motherhood, and the importance of sacred progeny.

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36 ibid.
37 Double trinities become particularly popular in the next century.
38 John Oliver Hand, *The Saint Anne Altarpiece by Gerard David* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 3. Hand further discusses the arrangement between Anne, Mary and the Christ child and notes that it, “…emphasizes Christ’s maternal antecedents rather than his affiliation with the house of David on his father’s side.”
Nimbus Origins

Due to the lack of previous scholarship devoted to the nimbus, it is first necessary to discuss the semiotics of the nimbus within Christian art before addressing the use of nimbi found in Gutrecht’s painting. The nimbus has always been a sign of divinity, however, a paucity of attention has been given to nimbi in regards to a semiotic reading. Use of the nimbus in art was interpreted as an indication of power or holiness. It began as a type of crown painted or sculpted above the head of a particular individual, thereby signifying the individual’s importance and setting him or her apart from others who might be represented next to them. It served as a “representation of spiritual character through the symbolism of light.”40 The nimbus is common not solely to western Christian art but to Buddhist art of the east as well.

This vast application of the nimbus provokes the question of its origins. While the nimbus is often acknowledged as religious iconography, it finds its roots in paganism: “This form, which we naturally associate so entirely with the service of religion and Christianity, is really pagan in its origin, and was a symbol originally of power rather than of holiness.”41 In Greek and Roman art, the use of such an adornment clearly represented a designation of power. Several scholars suggest that the rayed crown, often a part of the halo, comes from representations of the pagan sun god Helios in which he is shown with golden rays emitting from his head in a circular manner (Fig. 3). F. Edward Hulme explains that, “the sun has often remained an emblem of the Divinity. Light has therefore been one of the attributes of the gods.”42 This Greek tradition was also said to have influence on the East, which would provide explanation for its use in Buddhist art and other various works from that region. Eastern art

42 Ibid.
employed the nimbus as a, “characteristic of physical energy no less than of moral strength, of
civil or political power as well as of religious authority.” Use of the nimbus is found among Romans as well. It can be found on coins of past emperors in which it served the purpose of portraying power. It also served to connect the emperor with the sun god, thereby providing royal lineage, a tool useful for producing successful propaganda. It is surprising to note that use of the nimbus among Christians is not prevalent until the sixth century. However, from that point on through the next three centuries, its use grows exponentially and is interspersed throughout Christian art. Works prior to the sixth century, apart from Christ and angels, represented religious figures devoid of this adornment.

Due to its rarity in early Christian works prior to the sixth century, it is uncertain as to whether the nimbus held the same meaning and significance then as it did later on. Hesitancy in the use of the nimbus among Christian artists could be attributed to their belief that it did not rightfully designate sanctity because it originated as a pagan symbol. Hulme furthers this theory, “So far was it [the Nimbus] from being at first accepted as a mark of sanctity, that in some early Byzantine works even Satan is represented as wearing the nimbus.” With the fear of the use of any symbol that could refer back to paganism, it is indeed no wonder that Christians were at first hesitant to use the nimbus, especially in terms of depicting sacred subject matter. The question that follows is why did it become such an important part of Christian iconography? Not much is known in terms of a decision regarding the sudden use of the nimbus in Christian art. However, at the point that it appeared acceptable to use, adaptations were made, and it became essential in the portrayal of holy figures.

43 Adolphe Napoléon Didron, Christian Iconography: Or, the History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages, Translated by E.J. Millington (with Additions and Appendices by M. Stokes), 89. Oringial: Adolphe Napoleon Didron, Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851).
Over the centuries, the nimbus saw many changes within art in terms of shape as well as size and arguably meaning. The portrayal of the cruciform nimbus or halo described as “...the field of the disk being divided into four quadrants by a cross, the sides of which are often concave,” is often reserved for Christ (Fig. 4). French theologian William Durandus (1230-1296), explains the cruciform cross as such, “The crown of Christ is represented under the figure of a cross, and is thereby distinguished from that of the saints; because by the Banner of His cross He gained for Himself the glorification of our Humanity, and for us freedom from our Captivity.” This variation of the nimbus represents the evolution of the halo within Christian art.

While the nimbus is commonly represented in a circular disk shape, variants of nimbi are present in art (Fig. 5). The circular nimbus is used for holy figures such as the Godhead, apostles, and saints. The square nimbus was employed to indicate that the person depicted with it was still living at the time of its creation; however, it was a signifier of that individual’s worthiness and that he or she could achieve saint status after death. Durandus notes, “When any living prelato or saint is pourtrayed [sic], the glory is not fashioned in the shape of a shield, but foursquare, that he may be shown to flourish in the four cardinal virtues.” The square was to represent the earth as the circle represented heaven. An example in which the square nimbus is used can be seen in the mosaics in Santa Prassede in Rome (814-824) in which Theodora, mother of Pope Paschel I, is nimbed with a square nimbus, thus indicating that she was alive at the time of this mosaic's creation.

creation (Fig.6). This provides further evidence that variants of the nimbus became rather expansive in shape and meaning.

In the case of The Holy Kinship, the nimbi are all circular, thus indicating that all of the members are deceased and have achieved divine status. In this manner of representation, it is a form of record keeping, of sorts, of the lineage and family tree of the Holy Family by stating that they are no longer living and that they are ancestors of the past. Nimbi can also be found in other shapes such as the triangle (Fig. 5). In cases in which a triangular nimbus is depicted, it is to represent the holy trinity (three sides of an equilateral triangle; one for each member of the trinity). Cheetham states that, “A nimbus of a triangular form, in allusion to the Trinity, was constantly given in later works of art to the Divine Being; this, however, is not found during the first ten centuries.” Also used by the Italians is the hexagonal nimbus employed for the purpose of personifying, “theological and cardinal virtues,” as well as allegorical figures. Each various shape of the nimbus contains different and significant meaning that helps in identifying individuals in works of art. No one particular culture used the nimbus quite as extensively as the Early Christians, nor created so many variants of it.

Nimbi denote divinity. Charles Morris notes that human civilization has consistently relied on the usage of signs and systems of signs and therefore, the mind remains unable to function apart from the use of these signs. The nimbus serves a very specific function and cannot be more eloquently explained than in Didron's statement, “It is the object of the nimbus, forcibly and at a glance, to express the distinctive character of the person decorated with it. It is

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50 Ibid.
placed like a crown on the head, the head being the noblest portion of the human being, and the loftiest and most conspicuous part of the person." By drawing attention to the head, certain implications can be made that the nimbus references knowledge, in particular spiritual knowledge. The location and placement near or on the head would suggest knowledge and an increase in divine and spiritual knowledge. When applying this to Gutrecht's painting, it further suggests the nimbus as indicator of a heightened spiritual knowledge for those adorned with it. According to Durandus, a thirteenth-century French theologian, it is the circular form that is meant to symbolize heaven.

**The Matriarchal Nimbus**

In Gutrecht’s *The Holy Kinship*, the women are nimbed to give preference to matriarchy. The Holy Kinship, in its own right, represents the matriarchal lineage. However, what is most interesting to note is that this particular version, as with most representations of the Holy Kinship in Germany at this time, includes men but does not honor them with nimbi (Fig. 1). Since no scholarly work has been written on this particular piece, the placement, color, and meaning of the nimbi are still a matter of speculation. I propose that since the men in this image lack the nimbi, and because the underlying theme of the Holy Kinship scene is matriarchal lineage, that the artist was promoting matrilineal power and the importance of the female role within the family. It is quite extraordinary for members of the Holy Family to be represented without the nimbus, because most depictions of the sainted males during this time in Christian art represent them with nimbi. Didron (1806-1867) expounds upon this as he explains,

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54 Ibid, 79.
Christian Iconography, will find this characteristic to be of the highest practical importance, and one, too, which requires to be studied with scrupulous attention, since the omission of it may transform a saint into an ordinary mortal, or an incorrect application elevate the mere mortal into a divinity.55

The nimbed female figures and lack of nimbed male figures would suggest to the viewer that the male figures were of less significance. It is therefore precarious when one learns that the male figures consist of members of the Holy Family as well as apostles and saints. It is noted that at times Joseph is represented without a nimbus. At this time he, like Joachim, had been sainted and would therefore be nimbed in artistic depictions, especially in scenes of the Holy Family.56

Regarding the apostles within a painting, St James and St John the Evangelist, Didron states, “the Apostles are always,...adorned with the nimbus. Like the divine persons, the Apostles are the first to assume the nimbus and the last to quit it.”57 It is therefore rather perplexing as to why in this particular case the artist has chosen to portray these males without a nimbus. What is interesting to note is that this painting was done after the time of the rise of the cult of Joseph in which he had risen substantially in the eyes of the Church. He was elevated from an obscure secondary figure, to sainthood as Christ's earthly father.

During the Medieval period, both Joseph and Joachim, were seen as, “models of masculinity to medieval viewers.”58 Therefore, it would stand to reason that he too would be nimbed. Josephine devotion was not prominent among Christians until the Medieval period.59 It reached its ultimate height in the seventeenth century.60 However, this was a relatively slow

56 Joseph was sainted during the twelfth century.
60 Ibid.
process. In early art, Joseph was depicted as an elderly man who was placed to the side or in the distance away from the Virgin and the Christ child as more of an on-looker than a participant. Joseph was only given mention in a few accounts throughout the New Testament. Among early Christians he was a secondary figure. Several texts during the medieval period were published that promoted Joseph and were influential in the rise of the cult of Joseph. St. Bernardino of Siena praised Joseph for having resided with holy people and, “asserted that Joseph was next to the Virgin in importance in the pantheon of saints.” His endeavors helped to spread the cult throughout Italy. In 1416, a sermon was written and delivered at the Council of Constance by Jean Gerson, then chancellor of Notre Dame in Paris. In this particular sermon, he is said to have, “extolled Joseph as Christ's earthly father...[after which] his three thousand-line Latin poem, the Josephina, laid the foundations of modern Josephine theology.” A shift towards accepting Joseph as a more prominent and active participant within the Holy Family was beginning to take place. However, depictions of Joseph within art remained varied; some portrayed him as young and more genial, while others continued with the distant elderly type. Regardless, at the time of Gutrecht’s painting, Joseph was an established and important member of the Holy Family, and worthy of the nimbus signifier. It is surprising that, after the struggle for Joseph's place within the hierarchy of the church, he should be represented without a nimbus. Instead, regardless of status within the church, all of the women are depicted nimbed.

61 ibid Joseph is only mentioned in eight accounts throughout the New Testament.
62 ibid, 22.
63 ibid, 23.
64 ibid.
65 ibid.
66 ibid, 33 In Europe, the Council of Trent (1545-63) was a landmark for the cult of Joseph in which it was declared that Joseph would play a more prominent role within the Holy Family. This is significant as it emphasizes the male role as father as opposed to other male roles. It reiterates the importance of the home as well as the family and that fathers should take part in the domestic.
Iconography

Iconographic elements are used throughout The Holy Kinship to emphasize matriarchy. The composition of Gutrecht’s painting is organized such that the women and children monopolize the foreground and middle-ground while the male figures occupy the background space. Women and children are shown nimbed—all with red nimbi with the exception of Anne—while the men are not. The setting in which the event is taking place is that of a domestic sphere. Fruit is one of the important iconographical elements in this work. The Virgin Mary, the Christ child, and Anne are located in the center of the panel with Joachim and Joseph behind and the dove of the Holy Spirit hovering above. Anne is represented holding an object in her left hand as the Christ child reaches out for it (Fig. 7). It is uncertain what this item is, though it is most likely a piece of fruit. It appears that the object Anne is extending to the Christ child is a fig, which was symbolic of fertility. The fig was associated with fertility due largely to the immense number of seeds that it contains, thereby alluding to Anne's role and place as the progenitor of the matriarchal line. She extends the fig towards the Christ child as if to suggest that his matriarchal lineage commences with and through her. In her offering up the fruit to the Christ child, the artist emphasizes her significant participation in the continuance of the family line. Furthermore, there is similar fruit on the ground near the other children as well as in some of their hands. The representation of children holding and actively engaging with the fruit could serve as signifiers of the characteristics that the children inherit from their mothers, as they are the fruit of the women’s wombs. Just as Mary and Christ reach for the fruit from Anne, and inherit her characteristics, the other children also hold fruit representing inherited characteristics.

69 Luke 1:42 “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.”
from their mothers. The children holding the fruit would also suggest a continuance of the progeny in Christ’s lineage as the fruit contains seeds, which signify fertility. The fruit thereby serves as a constant link back to this idea of fertility and continuance of the matrilineage.

The nimbus is of distinct significance in this work. As previously mentioned, the nimbus suggests the heightened spiritual knowledge of those adorned by it. The nimbi also serve the purpose of bringing focus to the wearer. Of particular import is Gutrecht’s decision to refrain from painting nimbi on the male saints in his painting, thus disregarding protocols of the time. It is particularly significant that Joseph lacks a nimbus—especially since this painting was created after the establishment of the Cult of Joseph in which Joseph was recognized as a saint and a member of the Holy Family.70 Joachim, too, had been sainted by this point in time. Contemporaries of Gutrecht such as the Master of the Speyer (1500) and the Master of the Goldfinch (1509) represented Joseph and Joachim with nimbi, proving their established sainthood.71 In the case of Gutrecht’s work, he is overlooking their sainthood by denying them this designator. Mary’s sisters, Mary Salome and Mary Cleophas, on the other hand, are also sainted and are depicted nimbed. By restricting the adornment of the nimbus to the women in the painting, the artist has placed special focus on the female figures. Since both men and women are sainted at the time of this painting, Gutrecht’s disregard of the men indicates a deliberate objective in placing the power with the women. Fifteenth-century German painter, Jan Polack,

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70 Joseph was recognized as a saint beginning in the twelfth century. He gained more prominence however, during the sixteenth century.
71 Sylvia C. Weber, *Old Masters in the Würth Collection: The Former Fürstlich Fürstenberg Collection of Paintings*, Swiridoff, the University of Michigan, 2004, 144-147. The Master of the Speyer altar active in Speyer or the Palatinate c. 1480 to 1500; Mary with the Infant Jesus and Her Parents, St Joachim and St Anne, c. 1500 in this painting Joachim is nimbed. The Master of the Goldfinch active on the Swiss side of Lake Constance, beginning of the 16th century; Altar of St Anne, 1509. In this representation both Joachim and Joseph are nimbed. “all can be identified as saints by their golden nimbi…the sacrifice rejected by the priest in the temple.” Hans and Jakob Strub in their creation of the Inzighofen altar also adorn Joachim with a nimbus.
created a similar Holy Kinship scene, in which he too chose to depict the women and children nimbed but not the men. In reference to Polack’s denial of nimbi to the men, Swiridoff remarks:

> The matriarch of this exceptional family group is St Anne, who, according to Christian beliefs, gave mankind the greatest of all gifts in the form of her eldest daughter Mary, Mother of Jesus, thereby deserving the deepest veneration.72

Swiridoff reaffirms that in Polack’s painting, “The most important figures...are the mothers and their children, who, unlike the fathers, are framed by haloes.”73 This painting serves as further evidence of Anne’s importance during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in Germany. It is understood, then, why Anne is nimbed and elevated. Furthermore, prominence is not solely given to Anne and the Virgin alone; it is extended to Elizabeth, and Mary's two sisters, as they are also given the divine nimbus indicator. Each woman in this painting thus shares in an elevated status.

Nevertheless, Gutrecht’s painting is unusual in comparison with Polack’s work and others in that its nimbi vary in color. Gutrecht utilizes an outer ring of gold on the nimbus to indicate divinity but further emphasizes import through the addition of color. It is interesting to note that the women in this painting are adorned with red nimbi with the exception of Anne who has been given a green nimbus (Fig. 1). The artist has carefully selected a color palette throughout the painting in which there has been a conspicuous repetition of greens and reds in the apparel. The majority of the figures are adorned in red robes with the occasional green headdress or shawl.

It is uncertain what the color variations of the nimbi in *The Holy Kinship*, are meant to symbolize. However, since the Christ child and all but one of the women are adorned with the red nimbus, it is likely that the red is symbolic of the imminent passion of Christ. Red is known

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72 Ibid, 179.
73 ibid, 182.
symbolically to represent sacrifice and pain within art, and particularly the Passion of Christ.\textsuperscript{74} For instance, red is used during masses that relate to the Passion and martyrs.\textsuperscript{75} Gutrecht’s contemporaries working in the Lake Constance area often depicted Christ adorned with a cruciform nimbus that was painted red.\textsuperscript{76} The cruciform nimbus is assigned to Christ in reference to his Passion, thereby including the use of red would inevitably link that color as a sign of the passion as well. It can therefore be argued that it was used in this work as a symbolic omen of martyrdom in which each member participates in the role that Christ will take on for them. As the image centers on the matrilineal trinity it gives emphasis to the female progenitor through which the lineage of Christ and his physical body commences.\textsuperscript{77} With such a focus on Christ’s physical body, and by extension His mortality, it can be presumed that the use of red alludes to his crucifixion and martyrdom. Also referenced is the eventual adult martyrdom of the children who are adorned with the red nimbi. In northern Germany preceding the time that Gutrecht’s altar was completed, an interest in depicting martyrs was prevalent.\textsuperscript{78} Therefore, a link between the mothers is made in that their sons, like Mary’s, were also martyred. Due to the fact that Mary and Christ are both depicted with red nimbi, it is also suggestive of Mary’s participation in the redemption of mankind. Through her willingness to mother the Son of God, Mary participates in the ultimate sacrifice of Christ in which man is redeemed. Through this, as noted by Catholic

\textsuperscript{74} James Hall, \textit{Dictionary of Subject Symbols in Art}, 2nd ed. Westview Press, (2007). In some Catholic factions it is worn to represent the Passion.
\textsuperscript{75} Gertrude Grace Sill, \textit{A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art}, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1975, 29. Red is used during “masses relating to the Passion, the Apostles, and martyrs.”
\textsuperscript{76} Sylvia C. Weber, \textit{Old Masters in the Würth Collection: The Former Fürstlich Fürstenberg Collection of Paintings}, Swiridoff, the University of Michigan, 2004, 103. Hans Haider Predella with Christ and the twelve Apostles, c 1500- Christ with cruciform cross is red as well as NelkenMeister and is in the same fashion (flowerlike) p. 103 “The cross-shaped rays on his halo are a reference to his passion.”
\textsuperscript{77} Pamela Sheingorn and Carol Neel, \textit{Medieval Families: Perspectives On Marriage, Household and Children} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 280. An emphasis is given to Christ’s physical body coming through this lineage.
\textsuperscript{78} Sylvia C. Weber, \textit{Old Masters in the Würth Collection: The Former Fürstlich Fürstenberg Collection of Paintings}, Swiridoff, the University of Michigan, 2004. “…individual accounts of some of the martyrs’ lives remind us that, for all their understanding of art and pleasure in creativity the patrons and artists felt a deep piety that meant they never tired of praising the lives of the saints and martyrs.”
theologian Denis the Carthusian (1402-1471), Mary can be seen as a co-redeemer. This idea that Mary also suffered in Christ’s sacrifice had surfaced in Gothic writings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in which sacrifice was made on both ends. Christ’s sacrifice and pain was physical while Mary’s was felt in her heart. Hence the other women, with their red nimbi, can also be viewed as participating in this process of redemption as they gave birth to the line of male saints who grew up to further the redemption of mankind through their proselyting and martyrdom. In which case, the red serves as a designator of participants of the Passion.

In Christian texts, red is also symbolic of and associated with blood, fertility, and life-giving power. If the red of the nimbus symbolized the blood of Christ it could either allude to the blood that would be shed during the Passion or to life-giving power. Christ gave his life that man might live. In so doing, it would stand to reason that all of his family was represented with him to show all that came through him and all that would be because of him. It also represents the power that women hold in producing life. The suffering of the women during childbirth and the blood that is shed alludes to the suffering and the blood that will be shed in turn by their sons. The red is therefore suggestive of the furthering of the royal bloodline, which links the family members together. These multiple meanings further honor the martyrdom of Christ as well as the important role that women play in their ability to give life. By producing saints and future martyrs, the women become participants in this martyrdom.

80 Ibid.
82 Moses (5:4-8) Adam is commanded to perform sacrifices as a, “similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father.”
83 Michael Stolberg, “AWoman Down to her Bones: The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,”vol 94, no. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, June 2003), 15. “the faculties or powers of the uterus were infinitely superior to those of the scrotum: it attracted and retained the male seed, nourished the fetus, expelled the infant, and freed the body of menstrual blood.”
The most notable and green nimbus is given to Anne (Fig. 8). In western art, the use of green nimbi is extremely rare. The only well-known examples are found in Eastern art. Nevertheless, originating with Early Christian art and continuing through Medieval art, the color green was commonly symbolic of both life and hope.\textsuperscript{84} This is appropriate for Anne as she is the progenitor of the line, giving birth to the Virgin who gave birth to Christ. Thus, she represents the hope she gives in her furthering of the matriarchal line. Perhaps more obvious, the green nimbus could symbolize life and the fertility of Anne. As Anne holds the fig and is adorned with a green nimbus, it furthers this concept of fertility, while also directing the viewer’s gaze towards Anne, thus reemphasizing the important role she plays as commencer of the genealogical line.

Green is also a representation of regeneration. Art Historian Gertrude Sill, who specifically studies Christian Art and its symbolism, gives an analogy of this, “As spring follows the dead of winter, so does life triumph over death. It is the color of victory, as in the palm and the laurel.”\textsuperscript{85} In this case, green could signify the regeneration that will occur with the resurrection of Christ in which he quite literally ‘triumphs over death.’ The green is also indicative of gardens and perhaps scenes of the \textit{hortus conclusus} in which Mary and the Christ child among other women, and their children come together to celebrate their roles as mothers.\textsuperscript{86} The \textit{hortus conclusus}, Latin for “enclosed garden,” is similar in setting and space to \textit{The Holy Kinship} in which only the women and children are permitted (Fig 10). The garden is a designated spot where women can come together and the fact that it is an “enclosed” garden suggests their dominance over the space. The garden in its very nature would allude back to this idea of regeneration and by extension female control over life-giving power. Perhaps both the red and the green nimbus alike represent the fertility and life force that women bring to generations of

\textsuperscript{86} Hortus Conclusus scenes emerge during the Middle Ages around 1400.
their families. This certainly would tie the two colors together with a common theme of fertility and birth.

The repetitious red and green color palette of the apparel echoed throughout the panel was common in the north during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In Quinten Massy’s *St. Anne Altarpiece*, the use of red is dispersed throughout the painting (Fig. 12). Likewise, in Lucas Cranach the Elder’s *Triptych with the Holy Kinship* of 1509, the use of red is prominent throughout (Fig. 13). However, only Anne wears both red and green robes. The coloration of the robes compositionally serves to direct attention towards Anne. Again, color is being used as a means to indicate the status and power of Anne and her divinely appointed contribution to the production of saintly progeny.

Plants could also signify life and fertility in art. The plant located on the table in front of Mary and Anne also takes on symbolic meaning (Fig. 9).\(^87\) It is uncertain what type of flower is being depicted here. While portions of it appear to resemble a thistle it is more likely a representation of a fanciful or imaginary chimera hybrid. The ambiguity of plants in art is a common practice during this time, as mentioned by Ross,

> Many illustrations of plants and flowers are found in medieval herbals which derive from classical studies on the identification...of plants but which show a tendency to become increasingly abstract in illustration style...[often] the herbals and their illustrations may include imaginary or fantastic material.\(^88\)

The plant in this representation of the Holy Kinship has three prominent buds, one of which has bloomed, which may allude to the Trinity or in this case the 'matrilineal Trinity.' The buds, in particular, represent the fertility of the plant, while also referencing the common allusion to the fertility of Anne. The plant can also be representative of the *hortus conclusus*. The women

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surround and emphasize the plant as if representing a garden (Fig. 10). The enclosed garden was a common symbol of the Virgin Mary.\(^{89}\) In addition, attention is brought back to Mary, as the flower is white in color like her more common virginal lily.

Furthermore, the child depicted to the left of the composition holds a stem of roses, alluding to her other common flower (Fig. 11). The rose serves as a polyvalent symbol in Christian iconography representing binaries such as fertility and virginity.\(^{90}\) The thorns on roses among other plants, are symbolic of God’s curse to Adam and Eve for their transgression in the Garden of Eden, “In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to hell” (Genesis: 17-18).\(^{91}\) In cases in which a rose is depicted without thorns, it is specifically meant to indicate the Virgin, ‘the rose without thorns.’\(^{92}\) In Gutrecht’s painting, the rose held playfully in the hand of the child references a thornless rose, which symbolizes Mary as devoid of sin and exempt from the Fall.

**A Space of Female Hegemony**

Equally significant to the nimbi in the representation of female power, is the compositional placement of the women in the painting. The female figures are given the greatest prominence and importance in the work. The women are central in the panel and closely organized in a semi-circular form. The men are confined to the outskirts, and a wall serves to physically separate them from the interior space that the women occupy. The semi-circular form echoes the shape of the nimbi. The trefoil of the frame also reflects the circular nature of the nimbi, and the female forms. Most of the women face forward with a slight turning inward of the body to form an arc. In contrast, the men are in a variety of chaotic, less-structured positions. In a

\(^{91}\) George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian art* (London: Oxford University, 1982), 38.
rather un-posed manner, they seem to be preoccupied with other concerns that are unrelated to
the current event. Sheingorn makes an interesting point worth noting in her statement that, “As in
the genealogical charts, here men are relegated to the periphery of the family. They may either be
entirely excluded or firmly confined to the space outside the intimate, domestic enclosure.”
This is seen in other representations of the Holy Kinship such as in that of the aforementioned
Flemish artist, Quinten Massy (1507) (Fig. 12). Massy uses a very similar composition to
Gutrecht’s in which the women are in the foreground in a semi-circular form with their children,
while the men look on from behind and are physically separated by a balustrade (Fig. 1).

Thomas Head adds, “Physical separation was the most extreme manifestation of
perceived gender differences.” The wall in Gutrecht’s painting serves to not only separate the
men and women but can be seen as a commentary on gender differences. Christian women were
frequently ‘cloistered’ and denied the privilege of participating in important public roles. In The
Holy Kinship, there is a reversal of roles in which it appears men are not participating in the
venerated activity. The same compositional separation is also seen in Lucas Cranach the Elder’s
depiction of this subject. This separational device excludes the men from the important event
taking place and distances them from Christ. The closer the proximity to Christ, the more
privileged the position. This emphasizes the precedence of the women in this painting and their
role in the fulfillment of Christ’s mission.

In this painting, the men, in a sense, are being pushed to the background and almost
excluded from the familial sphere in the foreground. This perhaps connects with the notion of
spaces of femininity in which men are not allowed. Although this is not a typical domestic

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93 Pamela Sheingorn and Carol Neel, Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household and Children
(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 278.
94 Thomas Head, “The Religion of the Femmelettes: Ideals and Experience among Women in Fifteenth- and
Sixteenth- Century France,” In That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity, University
sphere example, it can be considered a domestic space and by extension a space of femininity. This is noted with the inclusion of a tiled floor and plants. It serves as a setting in which women have come together celebrating family, hence, indicating the female role as progenitor of the sacred.\footnote{Ibid.} It represents a sacred artwork among women and the importance of raising and rearing children. It can be considered a space of femininity because the nurturing of children was considered to be a maternal role.\footnote{Sarah Jane Boss, Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary, London: Cassell Publishing, 2000, 50.} The maternal role and the domestic sphere are intimately understood by women and shared by women. The presence of children along with other elements such as the domestic floor and the inclusion of a table with flowers, and colored draperies, and cloths also help to contribute to the effect of a female, domestic space. Lucas Cranach the Elder also utilizes the detail of tile and draperies in his Holy Kinship scene as a means of establishing an interior space (Fig. 13). In Gutrecht’s painting, the men placed in the background looking on would signify a curiosity regarding the space they are separated from. The other men whose gazes are variously directed would perhaps represent a lack of connection to the space. These unfocused gazes also serve to disassociate them as participants in the important ritual of the inner core.\footnote{Andrea Pearson, ed. Women and Portraits in Early Modern Europe: Gender, Agency, Identity. Ashgate, 2008.} Through this disassociation, the males are diminished in import in their distance from the event taking place. It is important to note that while the majority of the men are disassociated from the event, Joseph and God the Father serve as exceptions as they stand above the grouping of Mary, Christ, and Anne, serving as a second trinity. These two male figures are also larger than the other males represented in the painting, which gives them import.

In other representations of the Holy Kinship, certain devices are used to detract from the men and focus on the women. For example, Sheingorn notes that at times, halos are used as
devices to obscure the faces of the husbands.\textsuperscript{98} This is applicable to this painting, as the nimbi block the view of the men. In which case, the men’s heads are significantly less emphasized. All of these elements draw attention back to the women and their ultimate importance. It is clear that the artist wanted to focus on the female figures in this painting and give prominence not only to Anne and the Virgin but to Mary’s two sisters, Elizabeth, and Anne’s mother. Each woman in this image is portrayed as having value, importance, and significance in the bringing forth of righteous progeny who would support Christ in the fulfillment of his sacrifice.

\textbf{Women in the Middle Ages}

There are ongoing debates regarding the extent of patriarchy in Germany from the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries. The shifts in patriarchal hegemony are not always conclusive regarding the effects it had on women’s roles within society. In some cases, claims of patriarchy have not allowed for any celebration of female roles in medieval society. It has been suggested that the reforms of Pope Gregory VII in the eleventh century led to a restricting of female roles in worship.\textsuperscript{99} Nevertheless, in double monasteries under the rule of St. Benedict, women lived and worked alongside men.\textsuperscript{100} Through the strict patriarchal hegemony, women found the means of establishing equality. Medievalist Barbara Newman identifies Hildegard of Bingen as one of the pioneers of this equalization during the twelfth century. Newman notes that Hildegard was the first Christian thinker to address the idea of the feminine in a positive manner.

\textsuperscript{98} Pamela Sheingorn and Carol Neel, \textit{Medieval Families: Perspectives On Marriage, Household and Children} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 278. Sheingorn also notes that in other representations of the Holy Kinship, there are instances in which, “the large halos of Anne and her daughters go a long way toward obscuring their husbands’ faces in the background.”


Hildegard was known for advocating women as helpmeets and as participants of the natural order.\textsuperscript{101} This, then, sets the foundation for a serious discussion of the idea of femininity.

In discussions of the sixteenth century, Steven Ozment suggests that despite a time of harsh patriarchy, there was also a sense of equality. Ozment further asserts that marriage often lead to an improvement of life for women. He notes that within the ‘patriarchal home,’ during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, authority was equally shared between the husband and wife. Thus, despite a predominant male hegemony, there still existed an amount of equality.\textsuperscript{102}

Early works coming out of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries such as the Imola and Queen Mary Psalters, demonstrate this desire to abnegate patriarchy. The Holy Kinship theme seemingly develops for this purpose. It serves as a parity to patriarchy as it portrays a theme in which matriarchy is dominant. It is clear that Gutrecht was looking back to earlier examples in which femininity was utilized as a subversive means to refute patriarchal control. In his painting Gutrecht emphasizes the idea that women are not to be subjected to men. This is done through the celebration of women as contributing members of the family indicated by their evident power in monopolizing the composition. Sheingorn notes that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, gender roles were beginning to change and that depictions of the Holy Kinship, “…served as one of the areas in which such issues could be examined and tested, for its members provided crucial role models in a society so attentive to its saints.”\textsuperscript{103} Gutrecht’s rendition does just that as he continues the promotion of women while attempting to discourage a shift back to patriarchy. He utilizes female saints, who commonly served as role models for women of the

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 59-62.
\textsuperscript{103} Pamela Sheingorn and Carol Neel, Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household and Children (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 273. “…for at some level these image of Holy Family examine and enact the attempts of medieval people to understand, to structure, and to change both gender roles and human families.” 274
time, while promoting female lineage over the patriarchal line. This thesis gives further support to this idea via a semiotic reading of women and the representation of their power.

To a large extent, women during the early Middle Ages were subjugated in one way or another to patriarchy; whether it was to the rulings of the local clergy or to their husbands. Previous doctrine for years had decidedly placed the female sex in a subjugated and submissive position to their male counterparts.\footnote{Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers, eds. *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986,xxi. “…biological differences between the sexes have throughout human history, been translated by social institutions into codes of behavior and law that privilege men over women irrespective of class.”} Between 1450 and 1630 both church and state supported reinforcements of patriarchal authority.\footnote{Ibid, xviii.} Passages in the New Testament particularly emphasized the inferiority of the female sex. In his epistle, St. Paul wrote, “Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.”\footnote{Ephesians 5:22.} This, among other such doctrines, lead to a widespread controversy concerning the position of women. For a long period of time in the later Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas’ ideas on the inferiority of the female sex prevailed.\footnote{Sibylle Harksen, and Abner Schram, *Women in the Middle Ages*, New York: Distribution: Universe Book, 1975. 29. Thomas Aquinas “refused to bestow holy orders on women, because he thought that they were not sufficiently versed in wisdom, and were, generally speaking, inferior to men.”} The male clergy associated the whole of the female sex with Eve and all lay-women were viewed as temptresses. Aquinas’ theories further fueled the already existing exclusion of women in church practice. Women were denied the right of saying mass, as it was seen as the ‘duty of men only,’ and they did not have the privilege of participating in pastoral duties.\footnote{Ibid.} While the vast majority of male clergy agreed to these strictures, there were some advocates who decried the injustice that was being forced upon women. One preacher, Robert d’Arbrissel (1045-1116), saw women not as Eve, but rather as representations of the Mother of God.\footnote{Ibid, 30.} During the latter portion of the
Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary was exalted above all by the religious orders.\textsuperscript{110} The Virgin was adored by men of the Middle Ages because they saw her as an example of a perfected woman.\textsuperscript{111} Towards the end of the Middle Ages and the commencement of the Protestant Reformation, Mary was generally given less adulation in the church. In Germany Luther taught, “If you believe in Christ, you are as holy as she.”\textsuperscript{112} Mary was not to be seen as more divine or god-like than any other. Many believed that to worship her was to commit idolatry.\textsuperscript{113} This, no doubt, had an impact on religious art of the time. While many were preaching the imperfections of Mary, artists such as Gutrecht were countering this controversy by reemphasizing her importance. By reasserting the importance of Mary, it was a means of contending against the subjugation of women under patriarchal rule.

**Motherhood**

During the late Middle Ages, female saints and their veneration were a popular focus in art and literature. Women looked to saints such as the Virgin Mary and Anne as role models of motherhood. Herlihy remarks that an emphasis on the ‘maternal behavior of saints’ furthers the ideology that, “the mother played a far more active role, and enjoyed higher prestige and stature, than we have hitherto recognized.”\textsuperscript{114} The Holy Kinship subject relates to the conduct of contemporary women. Christ’s existence and physical body were made possible by maternal ancestors, the glorification of which also elevated maternal roles.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid. “[Men] conceived of her [the Virgin] as a sublime idea, in which the soul and the heart may forever discover new wonders… Womankind, fallen, fragile, and dangerous, stood forth perfect and spotless in the celestial essence of womanhood, worthy of infinite love.” Women became fallen after the transgressions of Eve.
\textsuperscript{112}Ibid, 167.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. Weygandus said, “Those who recited the Ave Maria in her honor, commit the crime of idolatry, for they make a goddess of a woman.”
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
As the key figure related to Christ’s birth, Mary was central. She was necessary in “the union of God and humanity.”\textsuperscript{116} Mary was awarded the title ‘Mother of God’ to make clear the union that resided in Jesus between divinity and humanity.\textsuperscript{117} During the thirteenth century, changes within Marian devotion resulted in a greater emphasis on Mary not as a queen, but rather as mother.\textsuperscript{118} Representing Mary in a position of power and authority was the way in which people understood Mary’s status as Mother of God.\textsuperscript{119} In regards to Mary, twelfth-century abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux remarked:

\begin{quote}
But in Mary there is something else still more admirable; her childbearing allied with her virginity. Never since the world began has it been known for any woman to be at once a mother and a virgin…should she not be exalted above all the choirs of angels, she who bore the Son of God?\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

Mary was unique with her childbearing of Christ and therefore deemed worthy of such exaltation. Mary’s conception of Jesus was only made possible through divine means—thereby, awarding Mary a type of divine status through her pregnancy as opposed to a mere mortal pregnancy.\textsuperscript{121} Mary’s pregnancy with Christ immediately elevated her in her ability to bear both a divine and mortal being.

However, during the years leading up to the Reformation, the veneration of Mary and particularly her motherhood were challenged. During this time it was understood that, the influence of the mother belonged in the nursery. At the same time it was likewise debated

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{118} ibid, 45-46. \\
\textsuperscript{119} ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{120} ibid, 47. \\
\textsuperscript{121} In Gutrecht’s \textit{The Holy Kinship}, Mary is depicted as unveiled alluding to her bridal and virginal state in comparison to the other secularized women within the composition who wear head coverings indicating their married status. These head coverings are reflective of German contemporary dress and therefore would have served as a means by which female viewers could identify with the depicted figures.
\end{flushright}
whether or not Christ exhibited characteristics of a dependent baby.\textsuperscript{122} Such debates stripped Mary of any authority concerning motherhood.\textsuperscript{123} By doing so, they took away the very essence of why Mary was selected by God to be the mother of Christ. Mary was seen simply as a vessel for Christ’s coming to Earth—discrediting any merit that she may have had in mothering and nurturing the Christ child. Gutrecht’s painting does just the opposite as it reiterates the importance of Mary not only in her participation with the Immaculate Conception, but as a mother. Scenes such as the Holy Kinship, as well as examples in illuminated manuscripts, reassert the “relevance of narratives of holy motherhood to female readers and viewers.”\textsuperscript{124}

Perhaps during the fourteenth century, when such manuscripts were in circulation, this imagery was rather straightforward in regards to its meaning for the female viewer.\textsuperscript{125} While the imagery presumably represented to women the importance of motherhood, other female owners of such imagery used, “…representations of St Anne, miraculous childbirth, and holy dynasties to assert their own positions and to enable them to manage society’s expectations of them as wives and mothers.”\textsuperscript{126} It would seem that women found a certain power within the imagery and a way to balance the power between genders. Hence, they could absorb their own meaning from the imagery, not the intentions of men.

By the early 1400s Holy Kinship scenes had asserted a focus, “…on motherhood and on positive relationships among women, though never obscuring the importance of their sacred

\textsuperscript{122} Sarah Jane Boss, Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary, London: Cassell Publishing, 2000, 47. This caused a simultaneous denial that “there is any theological merit in attributing to Christ the characteristics of a dependent baby.”

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid 50.


\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 3.

\textsuperscript{126} ibid, 40.
progeny.” In a sense, women participated as subjects to the rule of patriarchy while exerting their own lesser power in the way that they chose to relate to such scenes. The research of Caroline Bynum has shown that women often reinterpreted symbols given them by the male clergy. For instance, concerning the maternity of Jesus, women often assigned to it meanings different from their male counterparts. Instead of merely viewing women as caretakers of children, women could absorb a sense of empowerment from images depicting the careful rearing and educating of children. According to Michael Baxandall, during the fifteenth century, St Anne was primarily identified with family and childbearing, thus furthering this idea of the promotion of motherhood.

Holy Kinship images were commonplace at the start of the Protestant Reformation as guides for women. They served as instructional models for women to reference. While instructional and religious in nature, it is also a power-imbuing image that reiterates the very importance of the female sex. Women of this time often sought equality—first through religion. This painting serves the purpose of pleasing the male clergy as a façade, while also providing varying meanings to women. This brought about the empowerment of women that was to come with the Reformation that would shortly follow. When looking at imagery of the Holy

129 Thomas Head, "The Religion of the Femmelettes: Ideals and Experience among Women in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth- Century France," In That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity, University Press of Virginia, 1990,152. “Their use of such metaphors as the maternity of Jesus…was different from that of their male contemporaries.”
130 Ibid, 113.
131 The Protestant Reformation began in 1517 with Martin Luther, just a few years after Gutrecht’s work.
Kinship, women would no doubt be aware of their gendered duty but could also re-appropriate such expectations through the holy models found in such images.132

For many, Anne served as the ideal model of motherhood. It is noted that, “St Anne and her extended family asserted ‘the positive value of marriage and motherhood’ and were used as devotional paradigms by, and for, married women.”133 In northern Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, devotion to St Anne was prevalent: “…she appeared in art and literature as the matriarch of a family of holy mothers and miraculous births.”134 Furthering this idea L’Estrange notes:

Thus despite the inferior status ascribed to the female sex in many late-medieval medical and ecclesiastical writings, this focus on holy motherhood would appear to privilege the social roles of late-medieval lay women.135

This serves as further evidence of the effect that such images had on women and by extension, the roles that they played within society.

Holy Kinship scenes would have been of interest to women of every class during the early sixteenth century. This was due to an increase in attentiveness regarding changes in religious belief.136 In particular this pertained to those who sought the import of a spiritual role in addition to the domestic role.137 Women desired to be a part of both the public religious and the private domestic spheres. In Gutrecht’s rendition of The Holy Kinship, these two spheres are paralleled as women occupy both a household sphere of sorts while participating in a sacred, religious event; actively taking part in a religious event was a privilege which had been denied.

133 ibid, 10-12.
134 ibid, 10.
135 ibid, 10-12.
137 Ibid, 7.
women for centuries. Combining both the domestic and religious realms would have provided women with a newfound sense of freedom in which they could actively be participants in both spheres.

**Conclusion**

Gutrecht’s painting is an example of representing a matriarchal perspective during a time when there was a desire by male clerics and artists to shift attention back to patriarchal hegemony. Within the painting, he uses the nimbus as a means of transferring the power back to women. The painting emphasizes the sacred role that women hold as progenitors of the family line. With this shift in religious beliefs concerning woman’s position as well as the defaming of the Virgin, Gutrecht’s work is controversial, not only in its emphasis on the importance of the Virgin Mary, but on the female sex as a whole. At a time when artists were trying to reappropriate Holy Kinship images for patriarchal purposes, Gutrecht stands apart. His unmistakable refusal to shift power and focus back to patriarchy distinguishes him from his contemporaries.

Iconographically, the artist must have had some intention or purpose in adding pigment to the nimbi. The red signified the martyrdom and Passion of Christ, and the green represented the fertility of Anne and her place as the head of Christ’s matriarchal lineage. In this manner, it served to elevate the female status. Color is deliberately utilized as a means of promoting the hierarchical dominance of the female sex over the space. The noticeable differentiation of nimbed women versus the men who lack the nimbus also speaks to the notion that the artist had a motive. It is presumed that the artist was following with the theme of the Holy Kinship scene in

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138 The use of red and green nimbi is rare. In a search of red and green nimbi in the Princeton Index of Christian Art (over 200,000 catalogued works of art) only one manuscript was found in which case a red halo was present. No records were found for green nimbi.
that it is representative of a matriarchal lineage and emphasizes femininity and women’s roles within the family. In this portrayal, the women maintain the dominant role, whereas the men remain in the background. A space of femininity is established within the familial group as the men are separated and off to the side—not being permitted to really join, but rather to look on. The circle formed by the women prevents penetration and the intervention of men in the central space. The role of the women is elevated as they are nimbed and symbolically they represent the taking on of the martyrdom of Christ. While they also serve as progenitors of the sacred. It is evident that this particular artist is more sympathetic to women given the apparent emphasis placed on promoting the power and importance of women, and the roles of femininity within the family, and maintaining the genealogical line.

This contribution and semiotic analysis may lead to the further interpretation of works contemporary to Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger. It serves to give insight into the objectives of artists working at this time in northern Europe. There is a need for fuller exploration of patriarchy at this time. This thesis questions patriarchy by looking more specifically at the representation of gender in sixteenth-century German art. It is likely that other artists would have been producing similarly empathetic works with parallel objectives. By establishing this foundation and evidence that Gutrecht was varying from what we now consider to be the patriarchal norm, it provides a basis for further investigation of his contemporaries.
Figure 1

*The Holy Kinship*, Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger, 1500-1510, oil on panel
Figure 2

Queen Mary Psalter, Tree of Jesse (left) and Holy Kinship (right), ca. 1310
Figure 3

Helios, Pagan Sun god
Figure 4

Cruciform and Triangular Nimbi
Figure 5

Triangular Nimbus: top left; Square: middle left; Hexagonal: lower left; Circular: Right image, middle
Figure 6

Theodora, St. Prassede, Madonna and St. Pudenziana, Church of Santa Prassede, Rome ca 9th century, mosaic
Figure 7

*The Holy Kinship*, Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger, 1500-1510, oil on panel
Figure 8

*The Holy Kinship*, Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger, 1500-1510, oil on panel
Figure 9

*The Holy Kinship*, Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger, 1500-1510, oil on panel
Figure 10

The Garden of Eden, c. 1410, Tempera on wood, Stadeisches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt
Figure 11

*The Holy Kinship*, Matthäus Gutrecht the Younger, 1500-1510, oil on panel (child with stem of roses)
Figure 12

Quentin Massy, St. Anne Altarpiece, 1507-08, oil on wood, Musees Royeux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels
Lucas Cranach the Elder, Triptych with the Holy Kinship, 1509, oil on panel, Städelisches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt
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