I have previously suggested in these pages that in the Humanities, to which this journal is dedicated, the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* dominates our thinking to such an extent that we often make false or over-simplified equations between texts and images, even though there is never an exact identity between words, which tell, and mute images, which show. The falsifying equation between text and image is a corrupting factor in what is called “iconography,” the discipline that seeks, however imperfectly, to give verbal meaning to wordless images. Texts may suggest connotations or implications of images, but images never render the exact denotations of these texts. I would like to suggest here a single example of such a delicate if not fragile link between text and image—a case in which the artist begins with a text but transforms it into something other than what the words of the text describe. My example is found in the art of one of the great masters in the history of European art. I speak of Giotto.

Of all the personages that Giotto painted in the Scrovegni Chapel, one of the most mysterious is the forbidding, hooded figure with his back to us, who clutches a drapery in his clenched fist in the left foreground of the *Arrest of Jesus* (fig. 1). This ominous figure leads us down a fascinating path. In his magisterial book *Giotto’s O*, Andrew Ladis observes that the “anonymous henchman” has in his “rigid grasp” the robe of an “inconstant and indeterminate apostle who flees . . . encircled by a robe that is loosened in the air.” This purple robe, Ladis continues, “disappears behind the frame but then is released into the air above the disciple’s
Fig. 1. Giotto di Bondone (1266–1336), The Betrayal, or Kiss of Judas. Location: Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.
Fig. 2. Follower of Simone Martini (fl. ca. 1330–1350), *The Kiss of Judas*. Location: Collegiata, San Gimignano, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.
shoulder.” Identifiable by his halo, the apostle “retreats beyond the left frame, which slices his face in half.”

Giotto’s depiction of the anonymous fleeing apostle in the Arrest of Jesus differs from most conventional Tuscan depictions of the subject from the thirteenth century. Before Giotto, only Saint Peter is usually present in scenes of the arrest; the rest of the disciples are rarely present. In the fourteenth century, however, in art contemporary with or after Giotto, we begin to see more frequently groups of fleeing apostles at the moment when Jesus is arrested: for example, in a panel from Duccio’s Maestà, in Lorenzetti’s Assisi frescoes, and in the work of a follower of Simone Martini in the Collegiata or Collegiate Church of San Gimignano (fig. 2). In these Sienese paintings, the apostles in flight who rush to the margins of the composition recall the words of Matthew 26:56, “Then all of the disciples forsook him and fled.” In this respect, they also remind us of the similar words of Mark 14:50, “And they all forsook him and fled.” Surprisingly, the Biblical source of Giotto’s anonymous apostle and also of the villainous figure who grabs him has been overlooked. This omission is especially surprising because Giotto’s point of departure here is found, I believe, in the verses of Mark.

After Mark writes that “they” forsook Jesus and fled, he speaks of a “young man” who was grabbed hold of by other men (Mark 14:51). This is, I believe, the passage to which Giotto alludes when he depicts the “indeterminate apostle,” as Ladis calls him, who had “a linen cloth cast upon his naked body” which was grasped by attackers. As the young man tried to flee the scene, his pursuers grabbed ahold of his drapery “and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked” (Mark 14:52). The back peddling young apostle whose face is cut off by the fresco’s frame evokes the young man of the gospel whose drapery is clutched by his adversaries. The purple drapery tightly grabbed by the hooded figure disappears outside of the fresco only to reappear fluttering behind the young man as he backs away. This passage is less an explicit
illustration of Mark than as a transformation of his text. In other words, I am not saying that Giotto’s figure is a literal illustration of Mark; rather, I am suggesting that Giotto derived from Mark the idea for the clenched mantle of the fleeing figure. By depicting the single villainous hooded man with the young man’s robe in his grasp, Giotto seemingly suggests a vivid pictorial metonymy for those in the Gospel “who laid hold on him” (Mark 14:51).

In a very subtle way, however, Giotto implies that more than one man attacks the fleeing youth. For directly behind the upraised knife of Peter, a hostile figure faces the fleeing apostle; he thus stands apart from the all the other soldiers who surround Jesus. His aggressive attention is directed at the departing young man in whose direction he faces. Although we do not see his hands, Giotto seems to imply his attack upon the youth in flight. We are prompted to imagine this hostile figure also grabbing at the disciple.

Giotto chose to emphasize only one figure grabbing the fleeing figure’s drapery, not the attack of those mentioned in Mark 14:51, I believe, in order to avoid the potential visual disorientation of such a multitude, and also not to distract from the principal subjects of the fresco—the arrest of Jesus and Peter’s cutting off the ear of Malchus, scenes that are both prominent in Giotto’s fresco and described in Mark 14. Although Giotto shows the drapery of the retreating young man in the clutches of his hooded attacker, his “young man” construed as an apostle is not running out from under his robe, nor is his naked body exposed. Evoking this detail, however, Giotto conveys the vulnerability of his apostle; but Giotto fixes our attention, above all, on the ominous hooded villain who clutches the drapery of the scarcely visible apostle—an invention inspired by Mark, a transformation of his text, as I have said, since in the Gospel the young man is not identified as an apostle.

By reducing the number of fleeing apostles to just one, thus diminishing the clutter of the scene and maintaining focus on his principal subjects, Giotto also magnifies the dra-
matic intensity of his image of denial. All of the other apostles (those who “forsook” Jesus) have already fled; they are already off-stage. Giotto’s remaining apostle, who evokes the “young man” in the Gospel, has almost fled the scene, but not quite, since we see his garment fluttering around only half of his face, which, as he backpedals, is turned to look at Jesus. All that remains, in effect, is the attempted restraint of the apostle whose drapery is tightly clutched by the sinister hooded figure. Thus, we behold the suggestion of both desertion (the apostles who have fled) and its aftermath (the final fleeing apostle) at once. We have here the condensation of different moments in time.

If Giotto implies something that has happened, that is, the departure of the apostles already gone, and if he depicts something that is happening in the present, before our very eyes, that is, the attempted restraint of the singular fleeing final apostle, he also evokes something that will happen—in other words, a third moment in time. For in his denial of Jesus, Giotto’s apostle in flight—all but departed, but not quite—also foretells the imminent denial of Peter, which is also described in the same chapter of Mark to which, I maintain, Giotto refers as his principal source. Like Peter later in the Gospel, our fleeing young apostle implicitly says, “I know not this man of whom you speak.”

Giotto is highly suggestive when he represents his fugitive apostle directly next to and behind Peter. He is no less suggestive when he renders the purple drapery of the apostle fluttering in proximity to Peter’s head. For it reemerges, as Ladis remarks, “one last time in front of Peter’s nose.” In this visual connection, Giotto implicitly links the denial of the fleeing apostle to the imminent three denials by Peter. Indeed, the purple drapery clutched by the hooded figure in the foreground, which after briefly disappearing, swells around and behind the fleeing apostle, also swirls around the adjacent Peter, thus heightening the unity of both figures visually and prompting us to meditate further on their shared denials.
Moreover, the golden undergarment of the fleeing apostle is linked to the color of Peter’s outer robe, visually prompting us to ponder further their shared meaning. This gold is ultimately keyed chromatically to and resonates with the expansive, tautly swelling, yellow robe at the very center of the composition, that of Judas—who personifies the most heinous denial of all at the very moment when he identifies Jesus. Judas’s outstretched left arm, which embraces Jesus, is visually linked to the similarly outstretched left arm of the dark, hooded henchman clutching the drapery of the fleeing apostle. We have come full circle. 

NOTES

1. For some images of the Arrest of Jesus before Giotto as well as both contemporary with and after him, see Anne Derbes, Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy: Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant (Cambridge and New York 1996), chapter 2.

2. The connection of Giotto’s fresco to Mark 14:50-52 was observed in a class on Italian Renaissance art by Jeremy Knox in the fall of 2010. Mr. Knox has graciously allowed me to share his aperçu here. I am also especially grateful to Emma Bardei, Hannah Bardei, Deborah Barolsky, Charles Deily, Anne Derbes, Sarah James, Hayden Maginnis, and Susannah Rutherford for various helpful suggestions.

To my knowledge, allusions to the young man of Mark 14:51-52 in the clutches of an adversary are exceedingly rare in the history of Italian art, but one further example can be cited here—this too observed by Mr. Knox. It appears in the above-mentioned Arrest of Jesus painted not many years after Giotto by an anonymous artist close to Simone Martini in the Collegiata of San Gimignano (Fig. 2). Here as a group of fierce soldiers, lances in hand, aggressively descends upon Jesus, a corresponding, but smaller cluster of apostles, conspicuously identified by their halos, retreats in flight. The depiction follows the tradition of Duccio and Pietro Lorenzetti, to which I have already referred, but whereas in the earlier examples the disciples flee to the right, in the fresco at San Gimignano, the apostles flee to the left. In this respect they recall Giotto’s fresco. The essential difference between Giotto’s work and the Sienese variation is, however, that Giotto rendered all of the apostles as already absent, whereas the painter at San Gimignano shows them in flight, thus still on stage. Although Giotto shows the robe of the fleeing young man clutched in one hand by his adversary, the Sienese painter, doubling the effect, depicts the fleeing youth’s drapery in the grasp of both hands of his attacker.