

Heavenly Venus: Mary Magdalene In Renaissance Noli Me Tangere Images

by

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# Heavenly Venus: Mary Magdalene In Renaissance *Noli Me Tangere* Images

Michelle Lambert-Monteleon

## ABSTRACT

Mary Magdalene has fulfilled many roles since she was first mentioned in the New Testament. Some of the most popular characters she has played are as First Witness to Christ's resurrection, follower and companion of Christ, Apostle to the Apostles, penitential whore, and exemplar for Christian women. This thesis was researched and written to explore some of these personae as they appear in Renaissance images of the *Noli Me Tangere* scene. The *Noli Me Tangere* story, which describes Christ's post-resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene, comes from the Gospel of John Chapter 20:12-15. Until the fourteenth century the *Noli Me Tangere* scene was depicted as a part of pictorial cycles concerning the life and death of Christ, or on rare occasions the life and death of the Magdalene herself. However, with an increasing interest in humanism, artists began to explore the *Noli Me Tangere* scene as an opportunity to analyze Christ's humanity and sexuality. The *Noli Me Tangere* as a backdrop is ideal since Mary Magdalene already suffers a reputation as a wanton woman.

Renaissance images of Mary Magdalene often depict the Magdalene as a Heavenly Venus. While the sensuality of Mary Magdalene as a licentious saint and the iconography of Venus as the representation of sexuality have been previously examined by scholars, the "love" aspect of Venus iconology as evident in the *Noli Me Tangere*

images of the Magdalene has received little, if any, attention. As the foremost icon of reformed sinner, Mary Magdalene is representative of both lust and love, much like the goddess Venus, and several Renaissance images illustrate this dichotomy.

The image of the Magdalene as both a symbol of lust and love relates to her dual nature as an ideal woman and a wanton woman. In Renaissance culture, two fundamental types of women existed, the good and the bad. Each type of woman was assigned a set of traits which would indicate her social standing. The ideal woman should be beautiful, chaste, and obedient while the wanton woman was promiscuous and independent. Due to her mistaken identity as a fallen woman, Mary Magdalene was on the one hand assumed to be a prostitute and is often portrayed with the attributes of a temptress; in addition, the Gospels describe the Magdalene as a woman with independent means. On the other hand, Mary Magdalene repented her “evil” ways and found faith in Jesus Christ. She was already a renowned beauty, and after her conversion, she became the model of chastity and obedience.

Analyses of Mary Magdalene’s image in several Renaissance *Noli Me Tangere* paintings reflect both actual Renaissance women’s lives and the perception of Renaissance women. Thus, Mary Magdalene represents the dichotomy of woman as ideal and wanton; loving and lustful; forgiven and fallen; exemplary and immoral; chaste and seductive; obedient and willful; and lastly, saint and sinner.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; and she beheld two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, "Woman why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When she had said this, she turned around, and beheld Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, "[Noli me tangere<sup>1</sup>], for I have not yet ascended to the Father."

John 20:14-17

Mary Magdalene has played many roles over the last thousand years, many not originally her own. Ultimately, her most important role has been as a companion to Jesus Christ. Historians, theologians, and artists have been the primary shapers of the

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<sup>1</sup> Translated as "Stop clinging to Me" in the New American Standard Bible. I chose to use the original Latin phrase in order to minimize confusion.

Magdalene legend; and through their inaccurate assumptions, literary misinterpretations, deliberate perversions, and attempted explanations of the Magdalene story, the conflated, and often convoluted, image of the Magdalene is difficult to discern. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Magdalene, especially in the depictions of the so-called *Noli Me Tangere*, was a favorite subject for contemplation as both a worldly example for the masses and an inspiration for the spiritual. A penitent sinner and sensual saint, the image of the Heavenly Venus Mary Magdalene, specifically in Renaissance *Noli Me Tangere* scenes, represents paradoxical cultural perceptions about women in sixteenth century Italy.

Chapter One of this thesis explicates and defends the study of changing Mary Magdalene imagery, and introduces the subject by providing a brief analysis of Giotto's *Noli Me Tangere* fresco from the Late Middle Ages. Chapter Two provides the background necessary to understanding the evolution of Mary Magdalene imagery during the Renaissance as a reflection of the Renaissance perception of women. The chapter further traces the path that led to the identification of Mary Magdalene as a whore. Chapter Three focuses on the two categories of Renaissance women: the ideal woman and the wanton woman. The ideal woman was a model of virtue and obedience while the wanton woman signified degenerate sexuality and independence. Chapter Four examines the influence that changing Renaissance culture had on the evolution of artistic representation in the Renaissance. The last section of Chapter Four offers analysis of Titian's work as the most successful rendition of heavenly Venus ideology. In Chapter Five of this thesis I will present my conclusions and provide an analysis of one last



painting, Lavinia Fontana's *Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalen* (1581; Uffizi Gallery, Florence), to prompt further inquiry into later trends of *Noli Me Tangere* imagery.

Nominal attention has been given to the iconography of the *Noli Me Tangere* in contemporary scholarly study. However, many references to the *Noli Me Tangere* and its imagery can be found in texts devoted to Mary Magdalene because the scene portrays the single instance in which Mary Magdalene and Christ are alone. The scene also establishes the Magdalene's role as First Witness to Christ's resurrection. Texts concerning the Magdalene's life, her role in early Christianity, and her universal appeal are abundant and serve to illustrate her significance and popularity.

In her book Venus in Sackcloth: the Magdalen's Origins and Metamorphosis (1975), Marjorie Malvern examines images of the *Noli Me Tangere* to argue that Mary Magdalene represents both a prostitute and a Christian, or Heavenly, Venus. Malvern also looks at the relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene, but through Medieval literary sources rather than through the images themselves. Ten years later, Jane Dillenberger reveals the grave injustice done to Mary Magdalene in art over the centuries. Her article, "The Magdalen: Reflections on the image of the Saint and Sinner in Christian Art" (1985) examines several images of the Magdalene pointing out the paradox of the Magdalene as saint and sinner, especially given her mistaken identity in the first place. Carmen Lee Robertson's M.A. thesis "Gender Relations and the *Noli Me Tangere* in Renaissance Italy" (University of Victoria, 1993) provides a fairly comprehensive examination of *Noli Me Tangere* images in which Mary Magdalene is equated with Eve and the Fall. Robertson argues that the composition of the *Noli Me Tangere* images, i.e.

Christ standing with Mary Magdalene kneeling in front of him, reinforced the existing male/female power structure.

The definitive source on Mary Magdalene is Susan Haskins' Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor (1995). Haskins traces Mary Magdalene imagery from Biblical references to twentieth century portrayals. Haskins provides a thorough look at the development of Mary Magdalene's alleged biography, as well as, the changing image of the Magdalene from saint to sinner throughout the centuries. However, she spends relatively little time on the *Noli Me Tangere* scene, instead focusing her discussion on penitent Magdalene imagery. Ingrid Maisch traces the history of Mary Magdalene's alleged biography in her book, Mary Magdalene: The Image of a Woman Through the Centuries (1998). Maisch also examines the Magdalene's sinner-saint image as a conception propagated by male authors. Katherine Jansen's book, The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages, offers a brief analysis of Botticelli's *Noli Me Tangere* (fig. 4) which emphasizes the Magdalene's role as exemplar. Jansen's study is centered on the Medieval concept of Mary Magdalene. In the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene was viewed more as a saint than a sinner, thus Jansen's book provides a positive picture of Mary Magdalene as a redeemed sinner turned exemplar and saint.

Transformations in artistic representation do not occur without respect to cultural changes in the society which creates, shapes, and commissions the artwork. The image of Mary Magdalene evolved along with, not independent of, the cultural changes occurring between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Consequently, Italian

Renaissance images of the *Noli Me Tangere* scene provide insight into Renaissance ideals and realities. Of particular interest is the insight into Renaissance gender relationships. Influenced by and representative of the society in which they live, most individuals conform to the thoughts and ideals that permeate their lives on a daily basis. Thoughts and ideals can be disseminated countless ways through textual images such as popular literature, religious doctrine, medical discourse, or satire; as well as, visual images in the form of painting, sculpture, drawing, cartoons, and advertisements. The relationship between men and women, especially male perceptions of the status of women, is influenced by these images; furthermore, the images reflect the existing circumstances of women's lives. Thus Mary Magdalene's mistaken identity as a former prostitute and the misogyny of the period shaped the Renaissance *Noli Me Tangere* images of Mary Magdalene.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy, Mary Magdalene imagery takes on a dual role. She becomes a heavenly Venus: 'heavenly' because she repents her sinful ways and finds redemption and spiritual love through her relationship with Christ; and 'Venus' because she represents feminine beauty, sensuousness, sexuality, and earthly love. Thus, she becomes the symbol of sexuality and chastity, sin and penitence, and independence and obedience all at once.

Lacking the humanized eroticism of later Renaissance images, Late Medieval images of the Magdalene do not differ much from the iconic representation of other female saints. Deeply influenced by Byzantine icons, Late Medieval depictions of the Magdalene focus on her divinity and virtually ignore her humanity. Late Medieval

images, such as Giotto di Bondone's (1267-1337) *Noli Me Tangere* (1305; Arena Chapel, Padua), portray Mary Magdalene employing codified saint iconography (fig. 1).

Additionally, in Giotto's fresco Mary Magdalene's stock posture and expression lack the emotion and, later, eroticism of the Renaissance images. During the Renaissance Mary Magdalene is commonly depicted with long, loose hair; however, Giotto, as a Late Medieval artist, represents her with her head covered. Generally, women with long, loose hair are iconographically associated with possessing a loose nature; therefore, Giotto covers the Magdalene's head to signify her conversion to a chaste life. In Giotto's fresco, the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Christ appears to be more formal as if Giotto is depicting the couple as Master and servant or Teacher and student rather than as companions. Christ turns his body away from her in order to avoid her "touch." This differs from later depictions where Christ seemingly reluctantly evades Mary Magdalene's attempt to cling to his corporeal body. Giotto sets the stage for the action of the painting through the representation of the two angels (Matthew 28:2, John 20:12) and the torpid tomb guards (Matthew 28:4). In later paintings the tomb and angels are rarely present or fade into the background (figs. 4, 7, and 8). Christ's crucifixion wounds and the halos worn by both Christ and Mary Magdalene are signs of their divinity. Giotto's fresco is a faithful retelling of post-crucifixion Gospel accounts.

The development of sensualized *Noli Me Tangere* images can be traced in four influential works dating from the early fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries. An analysis of *Noli Me Tangere* images painted by Fra Angelico, Correggio, Bronzino, and Titian will illustrate the progressive eroticism of Mary Magdalene in *Noli Me Tangere*

imagery. In addition to these four works, I will analyze Titian's *Venus and Adonis*, *Venus Anadyomene*, and *St Mary Magdalene*, to demonstrate the increasingly common identification of Mary Magdalene as Heavenly Venus. Real changes in the *Noli Me Tangere* imagery begin to take shape with Fra Angelico's fresco in the San Marco Monastery in Florence (fig. 5) (1440-1441). The most heavily eroticized instance of Heavenly Venus imagery materializes in Correggio's version (fig. 6) (1525). The developing sensualization of these images is shaped, in part, by Italian Renaissance culture.

The religion, art, literature, law, medicine, and politics of early modern Italy established specific codes of conduct for men and women. Women of the nobility were expected to be chaste, virtuous, and obedient. But the Renaissance also instituted public brothels and regulated prostitution. Courtesans, the elite prostitutes, enjoyed more freedoms than their courtly counterparts. Courtesans often moved in circles that were forbidden to virtuous women. Courtesans could pursue intellectual interests more freely, and many courtesans even published their work. The same doors were rarely open to courtly women.

This paradox must have caused much confusion among worthy women. On the one hand, the Church and popular culture advocated virginity, purity, and modesty as traits of the ideal woman. On the other hand, however, prostitution was openly tolerated, and even though prostitutes were denigrated as the lowest sort of woman, the truth of the matter is prostitution would not exist if men ceased to solicit its services. As an alleged former prostitute, Mary Magdalene exhibits the attributes of the temptress even in her

saintliness, which is one of the reasons so much eroticism is present in later Renaissance portrayals. She becomes the dichotomy of the ideal/wanton woman Renaissance minds tried to define and codify.

The heavenly Venus paradox culminates in Titian's *Noli Me Tangere* (1512-1515; National Gallery, London) (fig. 8). A comparison of Titian's *Noli Me Tangere* and his later *Venus and Adonis* (1553-1554; Prado, Madrid) (fig. 12) provides further evidence of the equation of St. Mary Magdalene with the pagan figure of earthly love, Venus. The analogous relationship of the Magdalene and Venus is nothing new; indeed in 1975, Marjorie Malvern wrote an entire book on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Most scholars, however, tend to view the *Noli Me Tangere* imagery as either pure eroticism for the titillation of its patron or as a devout retelling of the event devoid of sensuality. I will argue the issue is much more complex. Renaissance humanism, Neo-Platonism, and especially the perception of women and sexuality all played a role in creating images that combine eroticism and spirituality.

Titian's paintings are undeniably sensual, and the similarities between the relationships of Christ and Mary Magdalene on the one hand and Venus and Adonis on the other can lead to the conclusion that these works are simply vehicles to exploit nudity and sexuality. But there is something else going on in these works; something often ignored in favor of sensationalism, and that is love. After all, Venus is the goddess of love; moreover, in one of his well-known homilies, Pope Gregory the Great refers to Mary Magdalene as the one whose "many sins have been forgiven her, because she loved

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<sup>2</sup> Malvern, Marjorie M. *Venus in Sackcloth: The Magdalen's Origins and Metamorphoses*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975.

much” (Hom. XXV). It is love that prompts Venus to restrain Adonis just as it is love that compels Mary Magdalene to reach out toward Christ. Accordingly, in order to understand Mary Magdalene, the Renaissance conception of love must also be explored.

As this thesis will confirm, Mary Magdalene represents the ideal Renaissance woman. The very perception of the paradox of her nature is precisely what fulfills the Renaissance male fantasy of the perfect woman. In Renaissance depictions, Mary Magdalene has the features of the wanton woman in her overt sexuality and independence, but she repents her wanton ways after she meets the man, Jesus Christ. After she becomes Christ’s companion, she tries to deny her sexuality and ensure her obedience to her “Rabboni,” but her sensual, smoldering beauty; long, wild hair; fine clothing; and expensive perfumed ointment serve as constant reminders of the enticing sexuality burning just below the surface.

## Chapter Two

### Mistaken Identity, Misperception, and Misogyny

One of the most infamous cases of mistaken identity has to be that of Mary Magdalene. For almost two thousand years, Mary Magdalene has been labeled a whore. Her bad reputation, formed by the Catholic Church, has granted numerous artists free license to depict the Magdalene as a fallen woman turned redeemed sinner. Her mistaken identification as a converted prostitute allowed Renaissance artists to portray her as a sensual being who had tasted the pleasures of the flesh, which made her an ideal model of the misperception of feminine nature that was predominant throughout Renaissance Europe.

Women were viewed as temptresses who could seduce and be easily seduced. Their very nature was allegedly more sensuous and emotional due to their genetic makeup.<sup>3</sup> Feminine beauty was both highly desired and carefully avoided. Female chastity was vigilantly guarded by a patriarchal society, and female obedience was emphasized and reiterated throughout all factions of the social order. Misogynist tracts, often disguised as conduct books or even commendations of women, were abundant and widespread. Misogyny fueled much of the debate over the nature of the feminine as

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<sup>3</sup> For a lengthy discussion of the Renaissance perception of the female body see Merry E. Wiesner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 2. Also see Leon Battista Alberti, The Family in Renaissance Florence: Book Three/I Libri Della Famiglia, trans. Renee Neu Watkins (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1994, and Martin Luther, Luther on Women: A Sourcebook, eds. Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).



defenders of women were rare; besides, as a rule, defenders of women only praised the precise characteristics which men found so desirable in women: beauty, chastity, and obedience.

Renaissance misogyny stemmed from a long tradition of the male perception of female inferiority. The Greek philosopher Aristotle associated the male with superiority and the female with inferiority (Physics 1.9). In the Aristotelian view, reproduction of the masculine was natural while reproduction of the feminine was regarded as an error. Consequently females were viewed as imperfect males. As a result, the position on women inherited from Greek philosophy became the foundation for Medieval and Renaissance perceptions of women. Christian doctrine also played a role in perpetuating the inferiority of women. Biblical passages such as “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman” (I Cor. 11:3) and “Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (I Tim. 2:11-12) gave early theologians the impetus to spread negative views about women to early Christian society.

### *The Magdalene Myth*

Mary Magdalene is first referred to by name in Chapter 27 of Matthew’s Gospel as an observer of Christ’s crucifixion. Mark’s Gospel, however, provides a clearer picture of Mary Magdalene’s importance as a follower of Christ. After Christ perishes on the cross, the male disciples flee (Mark 14:50), but “there were also some women

looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. And when He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him” (Mark 15:40-41). Mary Magdalene’s faith in Christ and her familiarity with his teachings is apparent from the beginning. When the male disciples fled, she stayed behind. She has followed and “ministered” to him since Galilee. As a result, she is rewarded by being chosen to bear “first witness” to Christ’s resurrection.

Though the four canonical Gospels are in agreement that Mary Magdalene was at least one of the first witnesses to Christ’s Resurrection, the *Noli Me Tangere* account occurs only in the Gospel of John chapter 20. Thus, in the Gospel of John, the Magdalene appears to have a closer and much more familiar relationship with Christ than she does in the synoptic Gospels. She is alone when she goes at dawn to the tomb seeking Jesus. Her intimacy with Christ becomes clear when Jesus calls her by name to trigger her recognition. There is an unmistakable familiarity between Christ and Mary Magdalene. Her joyful attempt to “touch” him and cling to the humanity still lingering in his body provides further evidence of their closeness. This close relationship with Christ grants Mary more significance than the other women mentioned in John’s Gospel, and consequently, fuels the curiosity of the reader. Here is a woman, about whom little is known, not only present at the event central to Christianity, but also singled out by Christ himself as his chosen First Witness. As Malvern explains, “imagination reach out for more knowledge of the woman to whom the risen Christ appears in flesh still sensitive to the touch and to whom the Christ speaks in a human voice” (21).

Mary Magdalene's popularity was based on her humanity as a penitent sinner, redeemed through her faith in Christ. However, nowhere in the Gospels is Mary Magdalene specifically revealed to be a sinner. She was really a conflation of several women mentioned in the four canonical gospels as having met with Christ. The three women she is most often identified with are: the sinner who, during a meal at the house of Simon the Pharisee, washed Christ's feet (Luke 7:37-8); Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus whom Christ resurrected (John 11:2); Mary called Magdalene of the town of Magdala, who was possessed by seven devils that Christ exorcised (Luke 8:1-2), and who was present at the Crucifixion, Entombment, and the scene of the *Noli Me Tangere* in the garden after the resurrection. Mary Magdalene is also often confused with the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3-11) whom Christ forgives, but this woman is never specifically named as Mary Magdalene. Theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel considers the conflation of these references "as the greatest historical falsification of the West" (qtd. in Dillenberger 115). She further intimates that the symbol of the heavenly Venus Magdalene was created by men and functioned to inflame male desires. She continues her assault on the deceptive representation of the Magdalene with the proposition that "at the expense of women a provocative imaginary picture – scintillating, moving and dangerous – had been created by the patriarchal church" (qtd. in Dillenberger 115). Exactly how did Mary Magdalene get the reputation of a fallen woman?

The confusion regarding Mary Magdalene stems from the various myrrhophores mentioned in the Gospels. The word myrrhophore ("bearer of myrrh") originated from the story of the three Marys who went to the sepulcher bearing myrrh and spices to anoint

Christ's dead body.<sup>4</sup> The sinner from Luke's Gospel (Luke 7:37-8), Mary of Bethany, and the women at the tomb, including Mary Magdalene, act as myrrhophores. The practice of anointing forms a common bond among these women that exegetes viewed as more than a coincidence. To add to the confusion, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene have the same first name. As a consequence, exegetes, as well as the populace, combined the two women's stories into the legend that was to become Mary Magdalene. Further blurring occurred as a result of the misinterpretation of the seven devils that were cast out of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:1-2). Since many early Biblical scholars believed Mary Magdalene's seven devils were the result of a sinful life, she and the woman from Luke's Gospel (Luke 7:37-8), who washes Christ's feet and dries them with her hair, have sin in common.

Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) accepted this conflation of the myrrhophores and in his twenty-fifth homily went as far as to refer to Mary Magdalene as "a sinner in the city" who "washed away with her tears the stains of wickedness" (Hom. XXV). Then around 591, Pope Gregory delivered a homily on Luke's Gospel, which provided a Church-authorized vita to the already prevalent uncertainty surrounding the biography of Mary Magdalene:

This woman, whom Luke calls a sinner, John names Mary. I believe that she is the same Mary of whom Mark says that seven demons had been cast out. How should we interpret the seven demons except as the totality of

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<sup>4</sup> There are five types of anointing in Hebrew tradition: as consecration to a holy or sacred use, such as the anointing of sacred vessels, kings, or prophets; as an act of hospitality as seen in Luke 7:38; for medicinal purposes; as a ritual for dead bodies; and as synonymous with the Messiah (literally "the anointed one") (WebBible). Ointment bearers were accordingly an important part of Jewish religious life.

vices? [...] Mary had the seven demons since she was filled with the totality of vices. [...] It is evident, my friends, that a woman who had earlier been eager for actions which are not allowed had used the ointment as a scent for her own body. What she had earlier used disgracefully for herself she now laudably offered for the Lord. Her eyes had sought earthly things; now, chastising them through repentance, she wept. She had used her hair to beautify her face; now she used it to wipe away her tears. She had spoken proudly with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet she fixed it to the footsteps of her Redeemer. She found as many things to sacrifice as she had had ways of offering pleasure. She converted the number of her faults into the number of virtues, so that she could serve God as completely in repentance as she had rejected him in sin (Homily XXXIII).

Gregory's homily evokes an image of penitence and faith, but at the same time, a real woman struggling with her sexuality and her regret emerges from Gregory's sermon. Gregory's homilies were exceedingly popular in the eighth and ninth centuries, even eclipsing St. Augustine's writings (Haskins 96). As a result, Gregory's sermons would be familiar to the literate and illiterate alike. Gregory's Magdalene served as an exemplar of penitence, a penitence which was obtainable by the noble elite as well as the basest peasant. She was also a symbol of humanity and sexuality, unlike the sacrosanct Virgin Mary. With Gregory's homily, Mary Magdalene's biography was officially sanctioned by the Western Church and has survived to the present.

In the eleventh century, the desire to give Mary Magdalene a more complete biography led theologians to expand on the seed Gregory planted. Mary Magdalene's conflation with Mary of Bethany provided her with siblings, Martha and Lazarus. Thus, Mary Magdalene was believed to have originated from Magdala but had taken up residence in Bethany. The importance placed on a saint's noble birth led Odo of Cluny (c. 878-942) to propose a patrician descent for Mary Magdalene. Furthermore, he used the family name of Magdalene as proof of her noble birth since poor families were unlikely to pass down family names.<sup>5</sup> This first step in identifying Mary Magdalene as a person, not simply a Biblical character, gave rise to a series of embellishments to the legend of Mary of Magdala. She was given parents and family property in Magdala, Bethany, and Jerusalem (Maisch 47).

Jacobus de Voragine (1230-1298) compiled the various legends of Mary Magdalene in his widely popular collection of saints' lives, The Golden Legend (1275). From 1470 to 1530 it was the most often printed book in Europe. The lead-in to Voragine's discussion of Mary Magdalene supplies various definitions of the term "Magdalene." One definition Voragine applies to Mary Magdalene's pre-conversion state is her remaining guilt and "everlasting pain" (4 ch. 36). Therefore, Voragine's personal belief in the Magdalene's sinfulness and subsequent redemption is evident in his introduction. He then presents his collection of Magdalene facts and legends as one cohesive tale. Voragine accounts for Mary Magdalene's "fall" as ensuing from her family's abundant wealth and her own legendary beauty. Voragine makes it clear the

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<sup>5</sup> For original Latin text see Patrologia Latina 133.714. Cited in Ingrid Maisch, Between Contempt and Veneration...Mary Magdalene: The Image of a Woman Through the Centuries (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998) 47.

Magdalene's beauty and riches facilitated her ruin. She gave herself over to sin precisely because she was attractive and affluent. The connection between pleasure and ruin can be seen in Voragine's comment "delight is fellow to riches and abundance of things, and for so much as she shone in beauty greatly [...] so much the more she submitted her body to delight..." (4 ch. 36).

In addition to the conflation of the Gospel sinner, whose sins are implicated as sexual in nature, the legend of Mary of Egypt became entangled in the life of Mary Magdalene. Voragine's The Golden Legend recaps and embellishes Mary of Egypt's story. The story tells of a man named Zosimus, who, while crossing the desert, discovers a creature he mistakes for an animal, but upon closer inspection, he discovers it is actually a woman deeply tanned and covered with hair. When asked how she came to be this way, she answers that she had lived a depraved life from the time of her adolescence. When she turned seventeen, she joined a pilgrimage group, and when the group visited the Church of the Resurrection on the day of the Adoration of the Cross, Mary was unable to enter as if held back by some invisible barrier. However, once she vowed repentance, she was able to enter the church. The next day she took three loaves of bread and began her penitence in the desert. She had been there for forty-eight years when Zosimus encountered her (3 ch. 21).

Voragine also relates a similar story of Mary Magdalene as a hermit in the desert. According to Voragine's retelling of Mary Magdalene's legendary desert penitence, Mary Magdalene lived as a desert hermit without running water, shade trees, herbs, or "bodily meats" for thirty years. Instead her sustenance was provided by angels who

would lift her to Heaven everyday upon each canonical hour. One day Mary Magdalene meets a hermit priest, also dwelling in the desert, who has witnessed her daily ascensions. She asks him, “Rememberest thou not of the gospel of Mary Magdalene, the renowned sinful woman, which washed the feet of our Saviour with her tears, and dried them with the hair of her head, and desired to have forgiveness of her sins?” (4 ch. 36). By claiming the Magdalene declared herself a “renowned sinful woman,” Voragine reinforces the Magdalene’s purportedly sinful nature. As a consequence of their common names and formerly sinful lives, Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalene were often conflated in religious art and iconography. Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt had much more in common: both women lived as penitents in the desert for a number of years; both women were characterized as sinners who were forgiven by God through their extreme penitence; and both women were “exposed” by a man, so their exemplary behavior could be admired by the faithful. Voragine’s tale does not mention whether or not Mary Magdalene possessed extremely long tresses though she most certainly did. He does, however, make a point of mentioning that Mary of Egypt’s hair had grown so long that Zosimus mistakes her for an animal.<sup>6</sup>

The Golden Legend finally furnished Mary Magdalene with the complete biography many theologians believed she had formerly lacked. Now, she had become a real saint with a life the general public could relate to and conduct they could emulate. While this composite Magdalene is a far cry from the Gospel Magdalene, the conflated character of The Golden Legend provided inspiration as an exemplar for the common

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<sup>6</sup> An example of an image of Mary Magdalene deriving from the tales retold in the Golden Legend is Lorenzo Credi’s *An Angel Brings the Holy Communion to Mary Magdalen* (1510) at the Christian Museum in Esztergom, Hungary. Also see note 8.



people. For Renaissance authors, artists, and religious orders, she also served as a medium with which to analyze male and female relationships and a vehicle with which to explore sexuality and divinity.

## Chapter Three

### Women and Sexuality in the Renaissance

Two conflicting attitudes toward the body characterize the early modern period. The body and its weaknesses, appetites, and mortality were viewed with mistrust and apprehension. This suspicious attitude, inherited from the Middle Ages, prevailed through the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation; consequently, fourteenth through seventeenth century Europeans were persuaded to practice prudery.<sup>6</sup> However, Renaissance culture was also responsible for the glorification of the classical nude and veneration of physical beauty. Italian artists, writers, and followers of humanist philosophy spread the classical ideals of corporeal and spiritual perfection throughout Europe. Equally pervasive Renaissance Neo-Platonism supplied the rationale for the reverence afforded earthly love and beauty. Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) dedicated his life to studying and interpreting Plato's texts and how the texts related to Christian theology. Ficino developed the concept of Platonic love, in which an appreciation of earthly beauty leads to an understanding of the beauty of God. In his Commentary on Plato's *Symposium on Love* (1484), Ficino first speaks of "platonic love," a relationship that includes both the physical and the spiritual. According to Ficino, love is the desire for beauty, which is the image of the divine (89-91). In privileging the physical, he

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on Medieval views of women see Pamela Benson, "Debate About Women in Trecento Florence." Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance eds. Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A Lees (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002) 165-187 and Adam S. Cohen "Devotion and Desire: Views of Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance." Letter Arts Review 12.4 (1996): 30-5.

differed from many of his contemporaries, even some who belonged to his innermost circle. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was one of the “members” of Ficino’s “Platonic Academy”.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Ficino, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) does not privilege the physical, nor does he concern himself with the subject of women. He does, however, understand the importance Plato placed on humanity. In his Oration on the Dignity of Man (c. 1480), Pico della Mirandola explains “Platonists themselves, sweating over his pages, understand him [Plato] only with the greatest difficulty when, in his oblique style, he teaches divinely about divine things and far more than humanly about things human” (par. 26). These ideas would form the foundation that standards of beauty and perfection would be built upon throughout the early modern period.

However, idealization of feminine beauty and perfection held no tangible benefits to actual women in terms of individual autonomy. Viewed primarily as ornaments, women were often objectified and conventionalized, their humanity disregarded. Consequently, women’s lives were shaped by men intent on devising the ideal woman supporting their own ideas of what women should be, ideologies which satisfied male emotional wishes and needs. Changes in educational organization also had an impact on the status of women. Few women were literate, and with the exception of nuns, the literate were usually found among the nobility (Wiesner 149). Humanism offered some upper class women the opportunity to learn how to read Latin, plus the upper classes were expected to understand and be able to discuss classical principles, but at the same time it placed female students under male authority. Moreover, many traditionalists

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<sup>7</sup> There is much debate over exactly what function the Platonic Academy served. For more information see The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of the Renaissance (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) 327.

believed reading secular literature only excited the imagination and fueled fantasies, which led to improper and sinful thoughts; thus, women were discouraged from pursuing worldly enlightenment (Robertson 86).

The dominant institution in the early Renaissance, the Church, was also extremely concerned with sexual piety, especially chastity, virginity, celibacy, self-control, and moderation (Karras 170). Virtuous women considered worthy of protection were kept from public view. Consequently, women's roles became limited to private spheres. As the only avenues open to women at the time were marriage, cloister, or prostitution, they had to guard their virginity at all costs lest they end up a courtesan (if fortunate) or a common street whore. Young virgins by their very nature were considered desirable and therefore beautiful. The Church maligned the importance placed on beauty by exalting the lives of converted women sinners who were often described in glorious terms as women who destroyed their beauty and thereby their sin, through penitential acts (Miles Carnal 71). Mary Magdalene's alleged stint as a hermit in the desert, along with her conflation with Mary of Egypt, led some theologians and artists to portray the Magdalene as gaunt and covered with hair to exemplify her extreme penitence.<sup>8</sup> The Magdalene through repentance and obvious favor with Jesus becomes the revered example "as both a goddess of life on earth and a common prostitute who, by finally denying all earthly life, is transformed into a heavenly Venus to be honored in Heaven 'beyond virgins' (Malvern 171).

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<sup>8</sup> Donatello's sculpture of *St. Mary Magdalene* (c. 1457) at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence is one example of this kind of imagery. Vasari wrote about the statue: "a finely executed and impressive work. She is portrayed as wasted away by her fastings and abstinence" (176).

The Church esteemed two ideals of the feminine at opposite ends of the spectrum: the hallowed immaculacy of the Virgin Mary and wanton promiscuity of Mary Magdalene. Perpetual Virgin, untainted by man's touch, Mary metamorphosed, with the help of the Church, into the ideal of purity. Alternatively, Mary Magdalene represents "one of the most attractive features of Catholic Christianity – the doctrine that no one, except Satan, is beyond the reach of grace" (Dillenberger 115).

### *The Ideal Woman*

The homage paid to the idealized beauty of women in art and literature of the period did not reflect their actual daily lives. Centuries-old philosophical, medical, legal, and religious treatises on gender and sexuality perpetuated the opinion that women were inferior to men. Misogynistic discourse of this sort justified, as far as men were concerned, masculine dominance over women (Rocke *Gender* 151). In Venice, reputable women were only allowed to leave their homes to attend church or family gatherings.<sup>9</sup> Engaging in conversation with men was regarded as shameful behavior. Even making eye contact was considered immodest, thus fifteenth century female portraiture was rendered almost exclusively in profile.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sixteenth century Venetian society was famous for its isolation of its young unmarried women. See Patricia H. Labalme, "Women's Roles in Early Modern Venice: An Exceptional Case." Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past ed. Patricia Labalme (New York: New York University Press, 1980) 136.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the seclusion of women and the female profile in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, see Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture." The Expanding Discourse: Feminism in Art History eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Boulder: Westview, 1992) 39-50. For a discussion of Renaissance female portraiture, see Paolo Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender Representation Identity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 49-83.

Conduct and courtesy literature flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Books such as Baldassare Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier (1528) helped to define and codify idealized models for feminine behavior. The Book of the Courtier, written as a conduct guide for the aristocrat, deemed the courtier's most important occupation to be a man-of-arms, whereas the courtly lady's primary duty was sociability. In describing the ideal court lady, the character of Magnifico Giuliano stresses "...a certain pleasing affability is becoming above all else, whereby she will be able to entertain graciously every kind of man..." (Castiglione 207). Castiglione expresses the typical Renaissance male's desire to create an ideal female whose sole purpose in life is to please not just the men in her immediate circle, but "every kind of man" (207). Albeit tremendously important, physical beauty was not the only desirable trait for women to possess. Chastity and obedience were also essential in rounding out a woman's charm and appeal. Beauty, chastity, and obedience are all components of the "certain pleasing affability" Magnifico believes signifies the ideal woman (Castiglione 207).

*Beauty.* Religious culture throughout Europe stressed that feminine beauty should be viewed with suspicion and apprehension, in part, because it proffered women a measure of control over men. A beautiful woman was likely to possess other feminine charms that could give her considerable power over her male admirer. But Renaissance Neo-Platonism revived the classical adoration of feminine beauty. In his dialogue On the Beauty of Women (1558), Agnolo Firenzuola's (1493-1543) character Celso points out the significance of feminine beauty:

[...] for beauty and beautiful women, and beautiful women and beauty are worthy of praise and of everyone's esteem. For a beautiful object one can admire, and beauty is the greatest gift God bestowed on His human creatures. And so, through her virtue we direct our souls to contemplation, and through contemplation to the desire for heavenly things. For this reason beautiful women have been sent among us as a sample and foretaste of heavenly things, and they have such power and virtue that wise men have declared them to be the first and best object worthy of being loved (11).

The equation of beauty and virtue was common during the Renaissance. Tullia d'Aragona (1510-1556) in her Dialogue on the Infinity of Love (1547) states "beauty is the mother of all forms of love" while "knowledge of that beauty" is the father (70). These ideas stem from Plato's Symposium and Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love. So for the Neo-Platonists, it was the outer body that determined inner purity (Matthews Grieco 57-58).

Feminine beauty was idealized and codified by the same love poems and conduct books that extolled the virtues of the ideal woman, but the pedestalization of beauty did not end there. In the visual art of the period, female saints and other female religious figures are frequently depicted as young, beautiful, and virginal, again underscoring the importance of a woman's outer appearance. Secular art, following classical ideals, glorified feminine beauty as is evident in the revival of Petrarchism and Botticelli's *La Primavera* (1482; Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (fig. 2). Francesco Petrarch's (1304-1374) lyric poetry was immensely popular during the Renaissance as it was written in the Italian

vernacular. Many of Petrarch's verses are dedicated to the deification of his unattainable love object, Laura. Petrarch's Laura served as the model for the Italian Renaissance tradition of ideal beauty. Botticelli's goddesses possess great beauty and grace, but their long flowing tresses are of significant consequence since the goddesses exhibit the same tresses as Botticelli's Venus in his *Birth of Venus* (1484-1486; Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (fig. 3), and as Mary Magdalene in his *Noli Me Tangere* (1484-1491; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia) (fig. 4). Additionally, in her article "The Ambiguity of Beauty: Tasso and Petrarch," Naomi Yavneh asserts "Golden curls are a standard feature of the traditional Petrarchan *donna*, adorning not only Petrarch's Laura but virtually every literary beauty of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries [...]" (137). As a typical trait of ideal beauty, long golden locks also become significant in the inquiry into views of female chastity which follows below.

*Chastity.* As far as the Church and secular authority were concerned, there were two categories of sexual behavior, one licit and the other immoral. Licit sexual behavior occurred only within the confines of marriage and only for the purposes of procreation. The second served to gratify the bodily passions fueled by lust. Since its purpose was not procreation, it was deemed immoral and irrational. Even within marriage where copulation was permissible, it was to be performed without the taint of lust or sensual pleasure. Church doctrine proclaimed that the ability to procreate was given to man by God, so animalistic passion would only serve to corrupt the spiritual love man and



woman should demonstrate for God.<sup>11</sup> Birth defects and stillborn infants were believed to be the result of God's wrath where illicit sexual behavior was practiced.

Renaissance men enjoyed more sexual freedom than women; moreover, men were allowed to pursue cultural and intellectual developments while the high point in a woman's existence occurred when her father or other male relative in charge found her a worthy husband. As a rule a good marriage entailed the exchange of a sizable dowry; hence, an unmarried woman's virginity had to be protected with utmost tenacity. Both the Church and the social order considered chastity the supreme virtue for all marriageable women. Whether unwed virgin, wife, or widow, modesty and sexual piety were crucial in establishing a respectable social position and a dignified reputation (Rocke *Gender* 151).

Henricus Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) praises women's ability to uphold a venerable reputation in his Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex (1529). Agrippa's Declamation contains the assertion that womanly virtue is superior to male virtue. In addition to praising women's "admirable beauty," Agrippa applauds female chastity (54). He continues his commendation by stating that women have the ability to grow their hair long in order to hide their "more shameful parts of their bodies", plus women never have to touch these "parts" as men do because in women, these "shameful parts" are "concealed in a secret and secure place" (Agrippa 54). Agrippa probably has the story of Mary Magdalene's penitence in mind when he speaks

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<sup>11</sup> Medieval theologians St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas wrote of the taint of lust within marriage in their highly influential works. Saint Augustine, The City of God, trans. John Healey, ed. R.V.G Tasker (New York: Dutton, 1968) Book 14 Ch. 18 and Thomas Aquinas, The Summa Theologica, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Chicago: William Benton, 1952) Part I of Part II, Section III.

of long hair covering the body as symbolic of great virtue since Mary Magdalene's common portrayal as a penitent features her covering, or attempting to cover, her body with her long loose waves of hair. In his treatise, Agrippa claims long, loose hair helps to conceal female sexuality, but as many Renaissance artists have so clearly demonstrated, strategically placed long, loose hair can be used to emphasize feminine sexuality (see figs. 9 and 10). Regardless of the exact meaning behind the representation of long, loose hair, Agrippa's message is clear: women have the natural ability to remain more chaste, thus female chastity is not only enviable, but it is also to be expected. Later in his treatise, Agrippa provides another extreme example of female chastity that is representative of Renaissance expectations concerning idealized modesty: "a woman suffering an abscess in her private parts which places her very life in danger has very often chosen to die rather than to be exposed, in the course of her care, to the view and the touch of a surgeon" (Agrippa 55).

Men were not the only advocates of female propriety. In an interesting twist on the advantages of virginity, the character of Leonora in Moderata Fonte's The Worth of Women (1600)<sup>12</sup> feels "For a woman, when she is segregated from male contact, has something divine about her and can achieve miracles, as long as she retains her natural virginity" (Fonte 91). Even though Leonora's reason for preserving virginity is not to uphold honor or to safeguard the bloodline as most males proclaim, it does not obscure the fact that both men and women highly valued feminine sexual piety. The loss of virginity could be devastating to a family as it seriously impaired a woman's future

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<sup>12</sup> Published posthumously. Moderata Fonte lived from 1555-1592.

chance of marriage.<sup>13</sup> In an attempt to remedy the situation and thereby regain family honor, tainted women who were either victims of rape or desertion turned to the courts. Often the woman, or her family, asked the courts to force the rake to increase the woman's dowry, so she might regain the possibility of making a decent marriage or entering a convent. If this was not feasible, the only other recourse left to the family was to coerce the offender into marriage (Wiesner 61). Obviously, if the woman had been raped this was unlikely to please her, but the importance of maintaining the semblance of family honor and propriety rendered the victims' feelings inconsequential (Rocke *Gender* 163).

*Obedience.* Part and parcel with virtuous behavior was women's subjection to men. Obedience to male authority ranked, along with beauty and chastity, as the most highly desirable traits the ideal woman could possess. The commonly held view of women's natural inferiority meant men had to take charge of women's lives. Daughters were subject to their fathers, uncles, and/or brothers, not only when it came to betrothal, but in all aspects of their lives. Married women were subject to their husbands. Even widowed women could not escape male dominion as they were subject to any surviving male family members (Wiesner 37). Women's "natural" weakness provided men with the rationale to expect complete compliance from any woman under their authority,

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<sup>13</sup> For further information on early modern attitudes toward sexuality and marriage, see the essays in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe: Institutions, Texts, Images* ed. James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For information specific to the Italian Renaissance, see the essays in *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance* ed. Marilyn Migiel (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998).

including female servants. Men felt justified managing women since women were perceived as incapable of managing themselves (Wiesner 38).

Many women felt trapped by their subjection to men. Corrina, another of Fonte's characters from The Worth of Women, recites her poem exalting her freedom as an unmarried woman:

The heart that dwells within my breast is free: I serve no one, and belong to no one but myself. [...] Beauty, youth, pleasures, and pomp are nothing to me, except as a trophy to my pure thoughts, offered up of my own free will and not through chance. And thus in my green years, as in the riper ones that await me, since men's deceptions cannot obstruct my path, I may expect fame and glory, in life and death (50).

Corrina's sentiment is echoed in Marfisa's speech to Mandricard in the immensely popular epic poem Orlando Furioso (1532) by Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533).

Mandricard has threatened to take Marfisa by force if no more men are ready to defend her. She responds that this would be true if she were subject to men, "But I am none of theirs; I belong to nobody, only to myself: who wants me must first reckon with me" (316). These two passages demonstrate women's awareness not only of the existence of the male expectation of the obedience of the female, but it also illustrates the female desire to be free of subjection to men.

However, the misogynistic comments of Castiglione's Gasparo sum up and attempt to justify the Renaissance male's subjection of women: "Therefore men have instilled in women the fear of infamy as a bridle to bind them as by force to this virtue

[chastity], without which they would truly be little esteemed; for the world finds no usefulness in women except the bearing of children” (Castiglione 241). The value placed on chastity for the bearing of children was, in the Renaissance male mind, a guarantee of the purity of his bloodline. A man’s sons are the heirs to his estate, so the magnitude of faithful patrilineage provided men with the rationalization to control female virtue. Male fantasies helped to shape the construction of an ideal feminine creature: beautiful, chaste when necessary, and obedient to her male masters. The wanton woman, especially in the figure of the prostitute, would challenge this creation.

### *The Wanton Woman*

Changes in economics and political structures throughout the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance created a strong desire to define and strengthen social boundaries. Increasingly blurred class distinctions and shifts in governmental power caused anxiety among the nobility prompting them to create an unchallengeable hierarchy by establishing rules and regulations pertaining to social status, sexuality, and even fashion. Sumptuary laws<sup>14</sup> from about the fourteenth century to the mid sixteenth century are just one example of the attempt to delineate social boundaries by setting standards of dress that would distinguish respectable women from unsavory women.

All Church doctrine prohibited extra-marital sex, but in reality men were given more leeway when it came to most sexual practices, the glaring exception being

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<sup>14</sup> See Catherine Kovesi Killerby, Sumptuary Law in Italy 1200-1500, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

homosexuality.<sup>15</sup> The social pressure impressed upon women to remain virgins before marriage was virtually non-existent for men in Renaissance Italy. Men were not as severely censured as women for not remaining chaste after marriage either. Men were supposed to abide by the laws forbidding rape, adultery, and other illicit sex acts, but more often than not, these laws went unenforced and unpunished. Noble women were generally considered off-limits unless the intention was marriage; however, men had female servants under their absolute control and willing prostitutes with whom they could indulge their passions (Rocke *Gender* 152).

Wantonness then was not applied just to prostitutes; in fact, any woman who was sexually active before, after, or outside of marriage was deemed unchaste. Renaissance sex manuals declared both sex partners must experience an orgasm in order for the woman to conceive. Medical experts believed females released their own “seed” during orgasm that was crucial if pregnancy was to occur. Obviously this proved to be problematic for a woman who became pregnant as a result of rape since pregnancy was regarded as proof the woman enjoyed herself (Wiesner 57). Although there were countless ways women could be seduced, overpowered or misused, the most obvious and most visible type of wanton woman was the prostitute.

*Prostitution.* Though the Church officially condemned and even on rare occasions rallied against it, prostitution was tolerated as a necessary evil. Prostitution

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<sup>15</sup> In the late fifteenth century, as many as half of Florentine men had been accused of sodomy before the age of thirty. Strict control of female chastity, the mass closing of many public brothels, and the late marriage age of men may have led many Florentine males to turn to sodomy as one form of sexual release. In 1432 The Office of the Night was established with the intent to control sodomy in Florence. For an in-depth look at homosexuality in Renaissance Florence, see Michael Rocke, Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

had become such an integral part of the European city it was difficult to obliterate.<sup>16</sup> The Church also reasoned that prostitution kept men from attacking virtuous women of the nobility, or worse yet, committing acts of sodomy with other young men (Witcombe 3). Censuses show the prevalence of prostitution in Italian cities. In 1526, a Venice census counted 4,900 prostitutes in a population of 55,035. The census number did not include the procuresses and pimps of the prostitutes (Norberg 458). The census paints a picture of a city in which nearly ten percent of the population made a living off of prostitution.

The popularity of prostitute saints as symbols of repentance led to much discussion of prostitution. In the Middle Ages a woman was a prostitute, *meretrice*, because she was lustful, not necessarily because she exchanged sex for money. Women who committed adultery were considered whores, as were, young maidens “ruined” by their youthful yearnings for their young suitors. Because she had a lustful and sinful nature, a woman behaved as a whore; consequently, a prostitute could repent her behavior, and as long as she completely abandoned her sin, could be forgiven (Karras 162). Harlot saints like Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt were continually presented as examples of sinners who had been converted and saved. Their stories contained the message that prostitutes could be saved; they also contained the message that prostitutes not yet saved were the worst of all sinners. In order to be forgiven for the sins of

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on the institution of prostitution in the Renaissance, refer to Pietro Aretino, Aretino’s *Dialogues*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal. (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1994) as a primary source, specifically the section on prostitution. Excellent secondary sources include Ruth Mazzo Karras, “Prostitution and the Question of Sexual Identity in Medieval Europe.” *Journal of Women’s History* 11.2 (Summer 1999): 159-177 and Kathryn Norberg, “Prostitutes.” *A History of Women: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* eds. Georges Duby, et al. Vol. 3. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993) 458-474.

prostitution, the women must cease the behavior immediately, understand the sinfulness of their actions, and repent fully. It was not enough to simply feel remorseful about being lustful; the penitent had to completely deny that part of her life and her nature, for a woman who was sexually active was reflective of a sinful 'feminine' nature. An entirely new outlook and new identity were required to completely convert. "Conversion from sin to sanctity was the most profound transformation a medieval person could imagine..." (Karras 166).

Originally the term *cortigiana*, or courtesan, was used to describe a high-priced prostitute who catered to the elite. The common street whore, or *puttana*, charged much less for her services and was in greater danger of being attacked. Sometime in the early sixteenth century, the term courtesan came to be applied to all prostitutes. Even so, distinctions were made between the *cortesana puttana*, *cortesana de lume* or *candela*, and *cortesana onesta*. *Cortesana onesta*, the honored or respectable courtesan, was the elite prostitute. She was most successful financially and lived among the nobility, even if on the fringe of respectable society (Witcombe 3). Elite courtesans were well known and enjoyed more social freedom than respectable women. Courtesans could be invited to social gatherings usually reserved for men where no honorable women would ever be allowed to attend. These courtesans had greater freedom to pursue cultural interests as well. Some of the best-known and most prolific women's literature to come out of the Renaissance was written by courtesans such as Veronica Franco (1546-1591) and Tullia d'Aragona (1510-1556).



*Independence.* During the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, many believed that though prostitution was sinful, it was the lesser of two evils--the “other” evil being sodomy among men. The idea of promoting sodomy by denying men the release of sexual tension through willing female partners led Renaissance authorities to institutionalize prostitution.<sup>17</sup> By the Renaissance, regulation of prostitution existed throughout Europe. In the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, France, Italy, Germany, and England established public brothels under governmental authority. Earnings, rent, hours of operation, and health exams were all controlled by the various governments (Karras 163). Still, women could not be allowed to live without the direct influence of men, especially financial influence, so the city authorities appointed brothel keepers. Also, the male members of the woman’s family wanted to retain control, which led to further regulation of prostitution. The possibility of promiscuity was not what led men to step in and try to control the use of women’s bodies and sexuality, but the fear and avarice connected to the financial and sexual freedom of women (Karras 166).

But by the mid-sixteenth century most of the official bordellos had been closed. Outbreaks of syphilis and religious turmoil led many governments to implement more rigorous rules and regulations concerning prostitution and other forms of illicit sexual behavior. After the closing of the public bordellos, most prostitutes were left on their own to procure clients and establish a “business” so to speak. Many prostitutes soon discovered however that without a manager, they were more frequently the targets of violence and theft. In order to avoid detection and thereby punishment under the new

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 15.

harsh regulation, the ingenuity and discretion of a procuress was essential. While in Venice pimps retained control over prostitution, elsewhere in Europe older women took over the care and management of younger prostitutes. These procuresses took a portion of the profit and served as liaison between the client and prostitute. By 1600 prostitution was one of the rare all-female trades. Old women, acting as mother or mistress to their charge, could safely obtain clients for the prostitutes under their management (Norberg 460).

Though beauty remains a desirable trait for all women, a courtesan could not be held to the same standards as the ideal woman. In fact, courtesans defied the male construction of the ideal woman as chaste and obedient. Courtesans certainly could never be considered chaste, and in their sexuality alone were freer than the *donna onesta*. In one sense, the courtesan enjoyed greater freedom of choice since she could refuse to grant her sexual favors. She publicly thwarted male dominion over her sexuality by exercising her right to control her own body.

Shifts in Renaissance power and society are repeatedly revealed in the developing imagery of Mary Magdalene and the *Noli Me Tangere* scene. These categorical limitations on accepted roles for women reveal the Renaissance male's attempts, intentional or not, to narrowly define woman's place in society. The fact that Mary Magdalene exhibited financial and sexual freedom was not lost in the images of her strength and sensuality. After all, the Magdalene alone stands out as undefined by a patriarchal designation. She is not identified as someone's mother, sister, wife, or daughter; she is identified as Mary from the town of Magdala, the place of her birth.

## Chapter Four

### Mary Magdalene and the *Noli Me Tangere* Images

A sign of Mary Magdalene's significance to Christianity is the wealth of images from the early stages of Christian art to the present depicting the saint's alleged life. In Renaissance art, Magdalene iconography portrays her as the first witness to the Resurrection, as the apostle to the apostles, as an evangelist, as a penitent whore, and as heavenly saint. These images can reveal a lot about the status of Renaissance women. Iconographical identifiers were used in Renaissance religious art, in part, so the importance of the spiritual theme of the image could be easily recognized and emphasized. Mary Magdalene's iconography has contributed to the creation and exemplification of her various roles. One of her most important roles was as exemplar. Exemplars were exceedingly important to Medieval and Renaissance society as guides for behavior and morality. As exemplar, Mary Magdalene was to be admired and imitated for her devotion, fidelity, and penitence. Her devotion, fidelity, and perseverance are illustrated in the *Noli Me Tangere* scene. Her melancholic, yet unrelenting, search for Jesus was characterized as perseverance. According to the Gospel of Matthew, "The person who perseveres to the end is the one who will be saved" (Matt. 24:13). In his homily on the *Noli Me Tangere* Pope Gregory declares "[...] the essence of good work is perseverance" (Hom. XXV). Emulation of the Magdalene's devotion and perseverance was achievable by anyone and therefore presented as a model of

imitation for everyone from the lowliest street prostitute to the highest-ranking member of the Church (Jansen 259).

One of the Magdalene's most intriguing roles, though perhaps the one most wrought with contradiction, was as sexual being. It cannot be ignored that Mary Magdalene was a woman, a woman obviously close to the man Jesus Christ. Given her mistaken identity as a fallen woman, she is often portrayed with the attributes of a seductress (figs. 6, 7, 8, and 9). Her iconographic ointment jar represents the expensive perfumes she once wore to attract men (fig. 7, 8, and 9), while her long, unbound, flowing hair and her voluptuous figure clad in red indicate a passionate temperament (fig. 6, 7, and 8). She symbolizes the seductress nature often ascribed to women. However, the need to couple and procreate was incompatible with the touted ideals of virginity and chastity. Mary Magdalene illustrates this conflict of interest within her very humanity. Mary Magdalene's sensuality stems from her mistaken identity as a prostitute, but Mary Magdalene is also an independent woman who leaves her hometown to follow Christ. In Biblical times it was rare for a woman to leave her family to follow a messiah, and Renaissance men would have expected their women to stay at home as well. Hence the Magdalene's overt sensuality reveals the Renaissance male's equation of an independently minded and spirited female with wanton behavior.

The make up of Western *Noli Me Tangere* scenes from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries remains remarkably similar. Mary kneels in humility in front of her master as she reaches toward Christ (figs. 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 12). Christ is generally shown turning toward her with his arm outstretched (figs. 1, 7, 8, and 12). He turns toward her,

so she will not feel rejected, but signals her to "touch me not"<sup>18</sup> (figs. 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8). Her head is usually uncovered, which is rarely seen in icon images of women and most likely suggests her strong and independent character hinted at in the Gospels (figs. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 12). Since John's Gospel asserts that Mary mistakenly takes Jesus for a gardener, gardening equipment is routinely pictured (figs. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 12). The progressive eroticism of the *Noli Me Tangere* images can be seen in four seminal works dating from the early fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries. Fra Angelico, Correggio, Bronzino, and Titian painted versions of the *Noli Me Tangere* scene in different artistic styles ranging from Fra Angelico's Late Medieval iconography infused with a touch of humanism to Correggio's secularized humanistic eroticism. These four works, along with Titian's *Venus and Adonis*, *Venus Anadyomene*, and *St Mary Magdalene*, illustrate the development of Mary Magdalene's characterization as Heavenly Venus.

Prior of the San Domenico Monastery in Fiesole, Fra Angelico's (1400-1455) images were intended to stimulate prayer rather than to represent a factual record of a Biblical tale. Fra Angelico's most famous works were painted in the San Marco Monastery in Florence. His frescoes can be found throughout the monastery, but some of the most interesting frescoes were painted inside the monk's cells as is his *Noli Me Tangere*. Fra Angelico's *Noli Me Tangere* (1440-1441; San Marco Monastery, Florence) (fig. 5) shows the beginnings of the transition from Medieval iconography to the humanist paintings of the Renaissance. Fra Angelico has not entirely broken away from

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<sup>18</sup> John 20:17 KJV.

the Medieval traditions of representation though he clearly understands perspective<sup>19</sup> as evident in the rendering of the empty tomb. Mary and Christ wear the two-dimensional gold disc halos prevalent in Medieval art. Fra Angelico demonstrates the transition from the Late Medieval artistic style to the more realistic style of the early Renaissance. This is evident in his continued use of actual gold for the halos, which had been used in icons to represent divine light because of its high value and ability to reflect and enrich light in a manner regular pigment could never achieve (Ferguson 92).

Jesus' appearance is quite conventional for iconographic images of the Savior, except for his wounds from the crucifixion. He retains the wounds of the crucifixion reminding the viewer of his earthly demise. Conventional images of the crucified and resurrected Christ depict Jesus clothed in little more than a white sheet loosely wrapped around his mid-section. Medieval artists were more concerned with representing Christ's divinity rather than his humanity which explains the absence of the stigmata. Christ's illuminated body and hovering stance just above the ground are deliberate attempts by the artist and monk to encourage contemplative thought while the monk dwelled in his room at the Florentine monastery. The brightness of dawn and the detailed garden are depicted naturalistically which reflect trends in Renaissance art. Fra Angelico depicts Christ in all his simplicity and glory while the solid black of the cave's interior reminds the viewer of sin and death overcome by Christ. Mary seems to be caught somewhere in between.

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<sup>19</sup> In Medieval art perspective was less important than the symbolic message contained in the work. Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) studied and mastered perspective in architecture. As the architect of the dome of the Florence cathedral, Brunelleschi's ideas were well-known throughout the Florentine artistic community. Perspective was an extremely important tool used by Renaissance artists to represent reality.

According to Christian iconography, red, the color of blood, which is associated with the emotions, symbolizes love. Red is also the color of fire, which can be analogous to passion and suffering, but fire, which is used during the Pentecost, also memorializes the coming of the Holy Ghost (Ferguson 91). Though she wears a red dress in this work, it is likely the color is meant to recall a story of the Magdalene's life after the Resurrection, in addition to, her passionate nature<sup>20</sup>. Since this fresco is located inside of a monk's cell for the purpose of spiritual contemplation and exemplification, it is improbable Fra Angelico would have chosen to portray the Magdalene as a repentant whore for fear of inflaming lust in the monk residing in the cell.

Mary initially thought Jesus was merely a gardener, so Fra Angelico depicts Christ carrying a hoe. As Mary reaches toward Christ, he crosses one foot over the other to lightly, but quickly step away from her. Fra Angelico depicts Mary Magdalene's love for Christ through the display of emotion present on her face. She is at once saddened and relieved. As Gregory points out, "Holy desires [...] increase by delay in their fulfillment" (Hom. XXV). Her passionate search in the break of dawn demonstrates her perseverance, but it also illustrates her faithfulness to and love for Jesus. She searches for him because she laments his death and wishes to see him one more time. When the angels in the tomb ask her why she is weeping, she responds "because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). When Christ

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<sup>20</sup> After the death of Jesus, Mary traveled to Rome to complain to the Emperor Tiberius about how Jesus' trial was conducted. She was admitted and sat at his table. As she told him the story of Christ, he blurted out something to the effect of Jesus could no more be risen from the dead than that egg you are holding could turn red! Accordingly, she held up the egg and without delay it turned red. This so-called "Easter egg" legend appears in the *Synaxarion of the Lenten Triodion and Pentecostarion*, eds. Fr. David Kidd and Mother Gabriella Ursache (Rives Junction: HDM Press, 1999), referenced in Schlumpf 4.

finally appears before her and he is apparently alive, her joy and relief overwhelm her and she reaches out to touch him. According to John Drury, the open arms posture of the Magdalene is "triggered by visual and intellectual delight" as she glimpses the astounding beauty of Heaven in the figure before her. She is the symbol of contemplative life, not manifest sensual delight (21).

### *The Paradox of Mary Magdalene*

Mary Magdalene as a supposedly former *meretrice* turned *donna onesta* was often portrayed with both the attributes of the wanton woman and the ideal woman. In the early sixteenth century, Medieval imagery of women as either virgin or evil temptress prevailed. However, the Magdalene "as reformed seductress [is] a wonderfully human image of repentance and amendment of life" (Dillenberger 122). The Florentine writer, Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1543) describes the physical characteristics that indicate a virtuous character, including a high forehead, arched brows, chestnut eyes, golden curls, a pointed but not upturned nose, pale pink ears except at the edges which should be transparent red, high ivory cheeks, a small mouth, and the most potent feminine feature – a smile (46-59). These traits of ideal beauty are discernible in the Magdalene depictions of the Renaissance. In art, Mary Magdalene is represented as a beautiful young woman with unbound golden hair and her iconographic ointment. She is commonly depicted with long, flowing tresses, also supported by her conflated image of the "sinner" who dries Christ's feet with her hair. Her eroticism is further manifested through her association with the Bride of the *Song of Songs* (Malvern 171). Gregory equates Mary



Magdalene with the Bride of the *Song of Songs* throughout his twenty-fifth homily. He uses lines from the *Song of Songs* to compare the Bride's search for her Bridegroom with the Magdalene's search for Christ. He explicates the two women's zealous searching: "We first seek the one we cannot find so that when later on we find him we may hold on to him more intimately" (Hom. XXV).

Fifteenth century artists also worked toward authentic characterization [i.e. the alabaster jar]. The main emblem of the Magdalene is the "alabaster jar of very expensive ointment" (Matt. 26:7). The Magdalene then is an obvious choice as a symbol of wealth and status. When represented as a devotional figure, or as a patron saint, the Magdalene's clothing is often lavish and ornate. According to the Golden Legend (4 ch. 36), the Magdalene was of wealthy and noble lineage; consequently, she is often portrayed in the popular style of the era and place belonging to the artist or patron (Dillenberger 116). The paradoxical Magdalene embodies both the traits of the harlot and the spiritually pure goddess. Correggio emphasizes the Magdalene's mistaken identity as a fallen woman.

Indifferent to the attractions of Rome, Florence, or Venice, Correggio (c. 1494-1534) worked in the North Italian city of Parma. He was able to maintain his originality throughout the High Renaissance and highly influenced seventeenth century Baroque developments. His portrayal of ideal beauty and his compositional arrangement were influenced by contemporary trends in Florentine art. One of Correggio's earliest small scale pieces is the *Noli Me Tangere* (1525; Prado, Madrid). In this work (fig. 6), Correggio uses the pyramidal composition of the classic High Renaissance. The

beautiful landscape evokes the light of dawn, the time when Mary Magdalene met Christ by the tomb (John 20:1). Correggio carries on the tradition of Mary cloaked in red, but this time the red symbolizes passion and her clothes resemble those of a Renaissance courtesan. The rich golden yellow brocade and translucent chemise would have been the envy of many a Renaissance woman. Interestingly, yellow is the color prostitutes were forced to wear as a result of sumptuary legislation, so they would not be mistaken for virtuous women. Mary also has the high forehead so praised by Petrarch and his contemporaries as a trait of ideal beauty. Her unbound golden tresses are topped with a pearl headband.

In the manner of dress, Florence encouraged ostentation. Deep blue and red fabrics and jewels were highly prized (fig. 7). Richly embroidered dresses, pearl necklaces, and slashed sleeves revealing diaphanous chemises as evident in Correggio's interpretation (fig. 6) were marks of wealth and refinement. However, when Savonarola and the reformers propagated the religious upheaval of central Italy, this same image of virtue was distorted into wantonness, vanity, and thereby licentiousness. Prescriptive codes and sumptuary laws barred prostitutes from donning opulent clothing, so there would be no mistaking them for true virtuous women (Karras 164). Gregory's comment on hair as resembling "overflowing earthly possessions" associates the Magdalene's hair with both her penitence and her worldliness (Hom. XXXIII). Christian authors of the time imply, through their repeated warnings on the topic of dress and etiquette, that it is the woman's responsibility to avoid producing desire in men. Mary Magdalene is the embodiment of sexuality and spirituality. Correggio does not portray the Magdalene as

reaching toward Christ; instead, he chooses to expose her attributes in a low cut gown and further enhance their grandeur by thrusting them towards Christ. Also Christ and Mary are completely isolated in this image. Gone is the tomb and even Mary's alabaster jar is conspicuously absent. The only aspect of the painting to indicate its subject matter is the discarded gardening items to the right of Christ. Gregory describes Mary Magdalene's "state of mind" as she fervently searches for Christ as "being inflamed with the fire of her love, she burned with desire for him whom she believed had been taken away" (Hom. XXV). Correggio depicts this burning desire in his *Noli Me Tangere*. Mary Magdalene's misidentification as a repentant whore provided Correggio with the justification for such blatant sensuality. This is a provocative scene indeed.

### *The Influence of Humanism on the Representation of Nudity in Religious Art*

In Renaissance and Baroque art, the imagery of the Magdalene, as well as other women of the Bible, fluctuated between an example of devout spirituality and a justification for female nudity. The Magdalene as a partially or completely nude image of beauty and sexuality may be unsettling for modern audiences, but throughout history the nude has met with differing reactions. Some regard the nude as the culmination of beauty in God's creation, while others view the nude as pornography (Apostolos-Cappadona 17). The Renaissance mind was fascinated with the humanity of the Divine. The new humanism of the Renaissance in Italy during the fifteenth century, with its preoccupation with classical ideals and the human figure, led to dramatic changes in the progress of the arts. The culture of the Renaissance incorporated the central mystery of

Christianity-the incarnation of the Divine in human flesh-with the artistic advances of the period.

However, artists alone cannot be credited for reviving the attraction to the nude figure since most works were commissioned by patrons. Since patrons were rarely connected to the Church as other than members, they were able to commission paintings of a religious nature, yet they could request, or at least appreciate the secular treatment the works were routinely given. Therefore it was a collective response which led to the sensualization of religious works of art. The appreciation of the human body figured prominently in artwork depicting holy figures. Once the Church no longer acted as the primary patron of artists, the shameful implication linked to nudity and sexuality began to weaken. The nuance of eroticism was persistently more noticeable in the religious art created during the Renaissance, and Mary Magdalene was the most palpable New Testament choice to represent this eroticism. Mary Magdalene is also the vehicle artists used to experiment with the representation of extremes of human emotion.<sup>21</sup>

The Magdalene received great veneration as a penitential saint during this period because she provided people with a visualization of physicality that transcended death through an eternal spirit. In this time of plague, pestilence, famine, and war, people suffered daily with the knowledge of human terminality. The image of the Magdalene, who underwent her own spiritual rebirth and who witnessed Jesus' Resurrection, offered spiritual solace to an uncertain existence. To alleviate suffering and

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Magdalene is often depicted at the crucifixion as either quietly weeping or uncontrollably wailing. For an example of a weeping Magdalene see Botticelli's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1495) at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan. For a distraught Magdalene see Titian's *Pieta* (1576) at the Galleria dell' Accademia in Venice. Both images are viewable online at <http://www.Magdalene.org>.

fears of impending death, people focused their attention on Christ and the Magdalene, and accordingly, away from life on earth and toward an afterlife in Heaven (Apostolos-Cappadona 17).

*The Humanity of Christ.* As a result of humanistic tendency to favor the individual, representations of the divinity and/or humanity of Christ [i.e., renderings of the Crucifixion and Resurrection] were vehicles for artists to display the range of emotions present. Along with supplying an avenue for viewers to identify with the figures in a painting, the display of human emotions in the portrayals of the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, onlookers, and other participants of Biblical narratives also gave artists a chance to "play" with various facial and bodily expressions used to convey feeling (Deshman 8). Christ's humanity and sexuality<sup>23</sup> were fascinating subjects to Renaissance artists. The infant Christ is often portrayed nude with obvious attention drawn to his genitals. The attention paid to Christ's genitals is thought to prove that he is indeed the incarnation of God in human flesh. The Christ of the Passion and Resurrection is almost always depicted nearly nude. He is usually shown wearing little other than his death shroud. According to Leo Steinberg, the nudity of Christ is symbolic of Christ's humanity, mortality, and sexuality, and the ostentatious display of Christ's genital area is "evidence of Christ's sexual member [...] as a pledge of God's humanation" (13). The humanity of Christ also plays an important role in the depictions of the Magdalene. St

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<sup>23</sup> Further information on the sexuality of Jesus Christ can be found in William E. Phipps, The Sexuality of Jesus (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), Leo Steinberg, The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), and Caroline Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

Augustine suggested that Christ's admonition to Mary indicates that Christ had not completely ascended. He explains that spiritually Christ's head has ascended to Heaven, but his feet, which are still a part of his physical body, yet remain on earth (paraphrased in Deshman 7). St. Thomas Aquinas reasons that Christ's ascension was due to that portion of his humanity which represents the power of God:

There is a twofold nature in Christ, to wit, the Divine and the human. Hence His own power can be accepted according to both. Likewise a twofold power can be accepted regarding His human nature: one is natural, flowing from the principles of nature; and it is quite evident that Christ did not ascend into heaven by such power as this. The other is the power of glory, which is in Christ's human nature; and it was according to this that He ascended to heaven (Summa Part III Quest. 57).

Christ's physical relationship to Mary has changed, and he does not wish her to cling to his corporeal body. Instead, she must turn her love for the human Jesus into love for the Christ as God.

Christ's bodily disappearance had initially filled the disciples, including Mary Magdalene, with sadness because they only knew Christ the man and did not yet know of the prophecy that would be fulfilled at Pentecost (Luke 24:37-40, John 20:9). The death of the body of Christ was a blow to his followers because without the figurehead of the man Jesus, his people did not know how to continue his work. It was not until they realized Christ did not die with his body that they were able to rejoice (Deshman 12).

Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572), court painter to the Medici, portrayed Christ's humanity in his version of a *Noli Me Tangere*. Painting in the cold, cultivated, and stately High Mannerist style, he owed much to his teacher Jacopo Pontormo. His religious works, such as the *Noli Me Tangere* (1561; Paris, Louvre), show the typical characteristics of Mannerism in elongated forms and crowded angular compositions. The *Noli Me Tangere*, which was painted for the Cappella Cavalcanti in Santo Spirito, is Bronzino's last purely Mannerist painting (fig. 7). The tomb in the painting is intended to remind the viewer of the scripture surrounding the Burial and Resurrection. The tree on the hill of Golgotha is symbolic of the cross, a "tree of life" rather than a cross of agony. Mary wears bright colored clothing-green, red, and blue-that appears very stylish especially when compared to the drab clothing of her companions, presumably "the other Mary" and Salome. Blue is the color of the sky and therefore is an allegory of Heaven and heavenly love (Ferguson 91). The Magdalene also wears a jeweled brooch and gold pin. Mary's hair is characteristically loose and luxuriously wavy. She has a muscular masculine body influenced by the style of Michelangelo, but her breasts are obviously highlighted. Christ is barely clad. His billowing shroud does not even attempt to hide his muscular Adonis-like body. The Magdalene has her arms open as in Fra Angelico's painting, but there is something much more provocative going on here. Jesus and Mary's eyes meet with a smoldering longing that will never be fulfilled.

Bronzino's Christ seems even more reluctant to admonish Mary than does Correggio's. Bronzino's Christ steps back with one foot and arches his back; however, the couple is still in close proximity. In fact, only inches prevent the "touch". The other

Mary and Salome do not appear to be shocked by the Resurrection of their Lord; instead, they appear to be witnessing a reunification of two lovers. One of the women does not even direct her gaze at Christ; rather, she seems to be gossiping with her apparently envious companion. Pope Gregory the Great describes the recognition scene as an intimate moment between friends: “After he called her by the common name of ‘woman’, he called her by her own name, as if to say, ‘Recognize him who recognizes you” (Hom. XXV). The three male disciples, barely discernible in front of the tomb, are completely unaware of what is taking place. This raises the question why Christ did not appear to the men when they were so near? Perhaps Bronzino understood the special relationship between Mary and Jesus and so emphasized the fact that she was chosen as First Witness. The Golden Legend clearly presents the view that mutual love existed between Christ and Mary Magdalene. Resulting from her conflation with Mary of Bethany, The Golden Legend states “And for the love of her [Mary Magdalene] he raised Lazarus.” Then a few lines later Mary Magdalene is described as “To whom Christ appeared first after his resurrection, and was fellow to the apostles, and made of our Lord Apostolesse of the apostles [...] (4 ch. 36). Bronzino depicts Christ and Mary Magdalene’s special and familiar relationship to stress her importance in the Biblical narrative as First Witness; however, he also throws in a touch of sensuality, lest the viewer forget the Magdalene’s alleged past as a former sinner and Christ’s dual nature as both man and God. For it is written of Christ in Hebrews 4:15 “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”



### *Mary Magdalene and Venus*

Tiziano Vecellio (c. 1487-1576), better known as Titian, was only nine years old when he was apprenticed to work in Venice. His *Noli Me Tangere* (1512-1515; National Gallery, London) was painted in Venice when he was in his twenties (fig. 8). A lush landscape continues the Renaissance tradition of naturalistic representation. The landscape also serves to parallel the human figures. The tall grandeur of the tree juxtaposes the untamed shrubbery just as Christ's divinity juxtaposes Mary's earthiness (Drury 117). Titian also emphasizes the close relationship between the Magdalene and Christ. She reaches out to touch him as he, seemingly reluctantly, barely slips away from her. She yearns to "touch" him, but he gently pulls his shroud toward him as he backs away. He looks at her face, yet keeps his arm above her as if he wishes her to know that he still cares for her. She ceases her weeping with the realization that Jesus is not dead but is alive. She kneels in amazement, reaching toward him. He acknowledges her but draws away. Jesus is not rejecting her love and adoration. He is emphasizing that the old human relationships are changed and must not be allowed to hinder the completion of his destiny. According to John Drury, Titian uses the shroud as a symbolic barrier between not only himself and Mary, but also between the living and the dead (118). The composition of the picture does support this theory. On the side of Christ, depicted as "the holy and naked body of the heavenly love which gave itself to die for humankind," the new light of dawn is visible (Drury 118). The green vegetation and the ocean which surround Christ symbolize the renewal of nature just as Christ himself symbolizes the

renewal of human life. On the opposite side, however, are symbols of man and his transient existence (Drury 118). As a symbol of worldly, sensual love, Mary desires and needs Christ's human touch.

The provocative scene is further elaborated by Christ's muscular and nearly nude body and his pierced foot that serves as a reminder of his sacrifice and of his humanity. The Magdalene's golden hair falls over her shoulders and onto her brilliant red cloak. The red in this instance again symbolizes wealth and passion. Splendid clothes, particularly in Venetian painting almost always distinguish Mary Magdalene. Fine clothing was the typical garb of both elite virtuous women and elite courtesans. Mary kneels low on the ground in a posture of humility, but the gesture of her right hand is the point at which her earthly love changes into spiritual love (Drury 21). "The Dual Nature" in images that present Christ as both God and human provide the impetus for the Magdalene's confusion. She gazes in wonder at the man she loves but cannot hold. She is a voluptuous, sensuous Magdalene.

Equating Mary Magdalene to Venus, the secular model of earthly love and sexuality, Titian kept to, but elaborated on, iconographic tradition. Titian's *St Mary Magdalene* (1533-1535; Palazzo Pitti, Florence) (fig. 9) rose out of iconographic tradition. Her long hair signifies her repentance as a result of her conflation with the sinner in Luke's Gospel (7:37-8) who dries Christ's feet with her hair. Her long tresses also symbolize her piety due to the conflation of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Egypt, whose hair grows long enough to cover her body when she becomes a hermit in the

desert.<sup>23</sup> Her sensuality was influenced by female figures from classical mythology that were increasingly produced and venerated in Renaissance Italy. Botticelli's *Venus (Birth of Venus)*, 1484-1486; Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (fig. 3) and *Flora (La Primavera)*, 1482; Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (fig. 2) are two prominent examples of the growing acceptance of female nudity and sensuality in art. As the goddess of flowers, Flora was associated with fertility and conception. Venus, as goddess of love, beauty, and pleasure, is an obvious choice for representation of female nudity and sexuality.

What does Mary Magdalene have in common with these pagan figures of immodesty and sensual delight? As companion of Christ and a supposed converted prostitute, Mary Magdalene signified conflicting Renaissance views of women as erotically appealing, yet chaste. Titian's *St. Mary Magdalene* is the Magdalene of ideal beauty and wanton sensuality. She possesses many of the traits of ideal beauty: voluptuous body, long golden tresses, full lips, rosy cheeks, and firm breasts. She gazes up at Heaven with her mouth slightly agape as she gathers her abundant locks around her in a Venus Pudica pose<sup>24</sup> (Tinagli 177). Her nudity and the placement of her hands draw attention to her sexuality. As an alleged former prostitute, one would assume Mary Magdalene would be familiar with the intimacy that takes place between a man and a woman during intercourse. She would presumably know the pleasures of sex and

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<sup>23</sup> For a summary of Mary of Egypt's story, see Chapter Two page 17. For the complete story see Jacobus de Voragine, comp. *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints* <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend>. 3 ch. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Venus pudica is a term used to describe the classic figural pose in which a nude female keeps one hand covering her private parts. Meant to represent modesty, often the pose emphasizes exactly what it is attempting to conceal.

possibly experienced orgasm, so the eroticism present in portrayals of her might have been justifiable if she had actually been a fallen woman.

Compositionally, Titian's Pitti *Magdalene* (fig. 9) resembles his *Venus Anadyomene* (c. 1525; National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) (fig. 10) drawing yet another parallel between the Magdalene and Venus. Both images are three-quarter length portraits of enticing female nudes. The background of both paintings is a shadowy sky painted with a limited use of color and definition. Venus and Mary Magdalene both possess long, luxurious locks, which in addition to their nudity, become one of the focal points of the images. Venus is wringing her hair dry and since this is the only action taking place in the painting, the beholder's eye is automatically drawn to appreciate Venus' abundant tresses. Mary Magdalene's strategically placed hair is highlighted; both literally through Titian's use of color, and figuratively by the Magdalene's attempt to cover her nudity with her golden waves.

Female nudity in the guise of Venus and Mary Magdalene is obviously the spotlight of these two works by Titian, but he wants to make certain the two women are recognized as well. Thus, Titian includes each woman's iconographic identifier in her respective portrait. Venus' seashell can be seen in the lower left corner of the painting. The seashell, a symbol oft associated with sex, and in particular, female genitalia "deifies [Venus] by reifying her sex" (Goffen Titian's Women 132). Mary Magdalene's ointment jar, also seen in the lower left corner of the painting, serves to identify her and to remind the viewer, simultaneously, of her importance as a myrrhophore and of her sinful past.

The subject matter of Titian's *Venus and Adonis* (1553-1554; Prado, Madrid) (fig. 11) derives from Ovid's Metamorphoses (10, 525-739); however, the action taking place in Titian's painting does not actually occur in the poem. Titian invents this scene in which Adonis takes leave of Venus to go hunting. In Ovid's poem, Venus warns Adonis against hunting lest he get injured, possibly mortally (10, 541-709). Of course, Adonis does not heed Venus' advice and is fatally gored by a wild boar. The moments before his death, the last moments he will spend with Venus on earth, are the moments Titian has pictured. Like Titian's *Noli Me Tangere*, *Venus and Adonis* is a tender scene of love and death, a *liebestod*. Both Christ and Adonis must leave this world behind, including their loved ones. Christ and Adonis gently dissuade the women's attempts to cling to the life-force still flowing in both men. In her book Titian's Women, Rona Goffen describes the action of *Venus and Adonis* as "a goddess [being] rejected by a mortal man" (Titian's Women 243). The *Noli Me Tangere* can be said to reverse this situation as a mortal woman is being rejected by a god. Nevertheless, these rejections seem reluctantly given when the posture and facial expressions of Adonis and Christ are taken into consideration. Both men step away from the women, yet they maintain eye contact as if unwilling to break the hold entirely. These are scenes of lovers' parting. The Golden Legend employs courtly love language to describe the close relationship that existed between Christ and Mary Magdalene: "He embraced her all in his love, and made her right familiar with him. He would that she should be his hostess, and his procuress on his journey, and he oftentimes excused her sweetly" (4 ch. 36). Titian illustrates this close relationship as mutual love. In his analysis of Titian's *Noli Me Tangere*, John Drury

maintains: "Landscape and love are in harmony. For whatever is going on between the two people here, it is something to do with love. Their postures speak it" (117). While the lovers may not be sexually involved, although Venus and Adonis almost certainly are, Platonic or spiritual love, at the very least, exists between these pairs of lovers.

The parallels between Mary Magdalene and Venus go beyond mere sensuality. However, it is the sexual facet of Venus' nature that is so provocative in Mary Magdalene. Sexuality in a beautiful female saint is the foundation of the Magdalene's portrayal as Heavenly Venus. She is heavenly because she is a devout follower of Christ who repents her sinful ways; however, it is those sinful ways, plus her renowned beauty and passionate love for Christ, that liken her to Venus. Within this paradox of the Heavenly Venus lies the key to understanding the Renaissance male's conflicting perception of women and sexuality.

Many sixteenth century portrayals demonstrate a manipulation of images and ideas by which men shaped Renaissance women's lives. Certain characteristics of sixteenth century *Noli Me Tangere* imagery led to this development. To begin with, emphasis on the sexuality of Mary Magdalene becomes more evident throughout the period. Moreover, the larger format and autonomy of the *Noli Me Tangere* asserts its new importance as a religious subject worthy of contemplation. Finally, the sensualization of Christ and Mary Magdalene reinforces the perception of the Magdalene as a temptress unable to control her sexuality. To sum up, sixteenth century *Noli Me Tangere* images serve to confirm and augment misperceptions about both Mary Magdalene and Renaissance women.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

A multitude of conditions shaped the *Noli Me Tangere* imagery between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Patrons' desires, advances in artistic methods, and religious crises are just a few of the cultural changes that influenced representation. Of principal significance, however, is the codification and regulation of women's lives that is reflected in *Noli Me Tangere* interpretations.

Sixteenth century *Noli Me Tangere* representations are especially intriguing as they exemplify the manipulation of thoughts and images, which not only reflected the male perception of the ideal female, but also shaped women's lives in order to achieve this ideal. The proliferation of and new prominence placed on *Noli Me Tangere* images signifies the recognition of this particular scene as a suitable vehicle with which to explore male and female relationships. The overt sexuality of the Magdalene and Christ's reaction to her echo Renaissance ideas about men and women. Woman is the eternal seductress, and while man is tempted, it is his responsibility to resist temptation and admonish woman. In sixteenth century Italian *Noli Me Tangere* images, Christ's admonition is gentle and his actions, that is, his reluctance to turn away, imply his unwillingness to relinquish his earthly body and leave his companion.

As the Renaissance period waned and the Baroque had not yet reached its peak, Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614) painted her version of a *Noli Me Tangere* scene titled *Jesus*

*Appears to Mary Magdalen* (1581; Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (fig. 12). Lavinia Fontana grew up in Bologna, a city that encouraged the academic and artistic talents of women. Women had been educated at the University of Bologna since the Middle Ages, and Bolognese painters claimed a woman painter, St. Catherine of Bologna, as their patron saint. Is it any wonder then that Fontana's *Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalen* significantly differs from the previous works? Granted, Fontana is painting later than the artists previously discussed, and the changes sparked by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation begin to take place in the 1550s and continue until the 1580s, but her education and upbringing probably contributed more to her choice of representation than anything else. The simple composition, soft light and muted colors show the influence of Correggio, but the subject is treated in an entirely different manner. Brown, the predominant tone in this somber rendering, is the color of renunciation of the world, as adopted by the Franciscan and Capuchin orders as the color of their habits (Ferguson 91).

Mary's halo, not seen since Fra Angelico's version, has returned, as well as, her humble open-armed posture. Christ is absolutely dressed as a gardener. Wearing a rustic gardening tunic and sun hat, Christ leans on a spade. Perhaps Fontana felt the flimsy attempts of past artists to excuse Mary's error needed rectifying. Mary is not as sumptuously dressed as in the previous works, nor does she appear to be displaying any other signs of status. Fontana depicts Mary Magdalene in a camicia similar to the ones the Magdalene wears in Titian's and Correggio's versions of the *Noli Me Tangere*; still, Fontana's Magdalene is obviously more discreetly outfitted. Again Mary is shown wearing her customary red; however, the red is more likely symbolic of the egg as in Fra



Angelico's interpretation. The dress Fontana's Magdalene wears is constructed of plain material in a conservative style. The camicia functions as a simple and practical undergarment just visible at the neck and wrists. Both the camicia and the overdress successfully conceal the Magdalene's breasts, and with the addition of her heavy cloak wrapped around her body, her womanly figure is barely discernable. The Magdalene possesses her iconographical long locks, but the lack of luxuriousness and sensuality serve to remind the viewer of her penance and absolution (Luke 7:37-50) rather than her wanton past. The alabaster jar Mary Magdalene holds in her left hand is made of gold and encrusted jewels. The style of the jar is noticeably ornate against the subdued and grave setting of the painting. The jar sparkles against the dark backdrop of shrubbery and earth. The attention Fontana pays to the jar and its prominence within the painting imply Fontana's respect for the Magdalene's significance as a myrrhophore. Fontana's emphasis on Mary Magdalene's role as a myrrhophore de-emphasizes her association with prostitution. In this painting, the alabaster jar functions not only to identify the Magdalene, but it also venerates her role as an anointer of Christ (Luke 7:38, 23:56; Mark 16:1).

It is Christ who reaches toward Mary signifying his attempt to console Mary's grief as she tries to cling to his earthly image. Christ touches Mary Magdalene's halo recognizing her sanctity. Fontana's Magdalene kneels in front of Christ with her arms open wide. She does not attempt to touch Christ physically; instead, she appears to be in awe as she recognizes the manifestation of God in her former companion (John 20:16-18). She gazes toward Heaven as she looks into Christ's eyes. The physical, sensual

longing present in Bronzino's, Correggio's, and Titian's depictions of the *Noli Me Tangere* Magdalene has given way to reverence in Fontana's painting. In the middle ground of the painting, Christ's empty tomb is visible. Fontana draws on a number of the Gospel accounts to create her image. On top of the empty sarcophagus sits an angel draped in white wearing a glowing halo (Matt. 28:2-3; Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4, 24:23; John 20:12). The portrayal of the women at the tomb appears to have derived from Mark 16:1 which tells of the two Marys, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, and Salome visiting the tomb to anoint Christ's body. Luke 24:10 also names three women present at the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. If indeed, the woman depicted closest to the tomb is Mary Magdalene; then, Fontana's painting is a collage of various events that occurred during the resurrection. The result is a conflated, albeit faithful retelling incorporating aspects of all four Gospel accounts. The passion and sensuality of the Bronzino, Titian, and Correggio has all but disappeared.

What is so provocative about Fontana's painting is how incredibly different the treatment of the masculine and the feminine is from Bronzino's version even though Fontana's portrayal is painted a mere twenty years later. Is her version so dissimilar just because she is a woman painting from a woman's perspective, or could it be the influence of Protestantism, or is it simply changing artistic style? These issues require further inquiry and analysis; still, Fontana's image differs so radically from the sixteenth century Italian images previously discussed one can infer that at the very least the image is one woman's response to the blatant sensuality of her predecessors.

Close examination of the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in sixteenth century *Noli Me Tangere* images not only mirror Renaissance views of women and sexuality, but also reveal how those views were shaped. Sixteenth century artists were influenced by the world around them; thus, their images are simultaneously a product of and a reflection of the culture in which they lived. In analyzing the changes in *Noli Me Tangere* images, from Giotto to Titian, varying alterations in meaning become apparent. From Giotto's faithful retelling of the Gospel story to Titian's emotionally and sexually charged scene of seduction and love, one thing remains constant: the caring relationship that exists between this man, Jesus Christ, and this woman, Mary Magdalene.

The dual nature of Mary Magdalene is apparent when her traits are considered in their dual functionality. The Magdalene's red clothing, for instance, is a symbol of passion, as well as, suffering. In addition, her ointment jar is a reminder of the perfume she once wore to attract men and thereby, of her purported sinfulness and vanity. However, the jar also serves to highlight the Magdalene's important role as an anointer, specifically an anointer of the dead. Her long unbound hair symbolizes both chastity and vanity. The lavish clothing the Magdalene is often depicted wearing was worn by both virtuous women and courtesans. Her licentiousness merges with her devout atonement throughout sixteenth century *Noli Me Tangere* imagery. The dual nature of Mary Magdalene represents the perceived dual nature of all women. As both a sinner and a saint, Mary Magdalene takes on the role of both the ideal woman and the wanton woman; therein lies the paradox Mary Magdalene embodies as a Heavenly Venus.

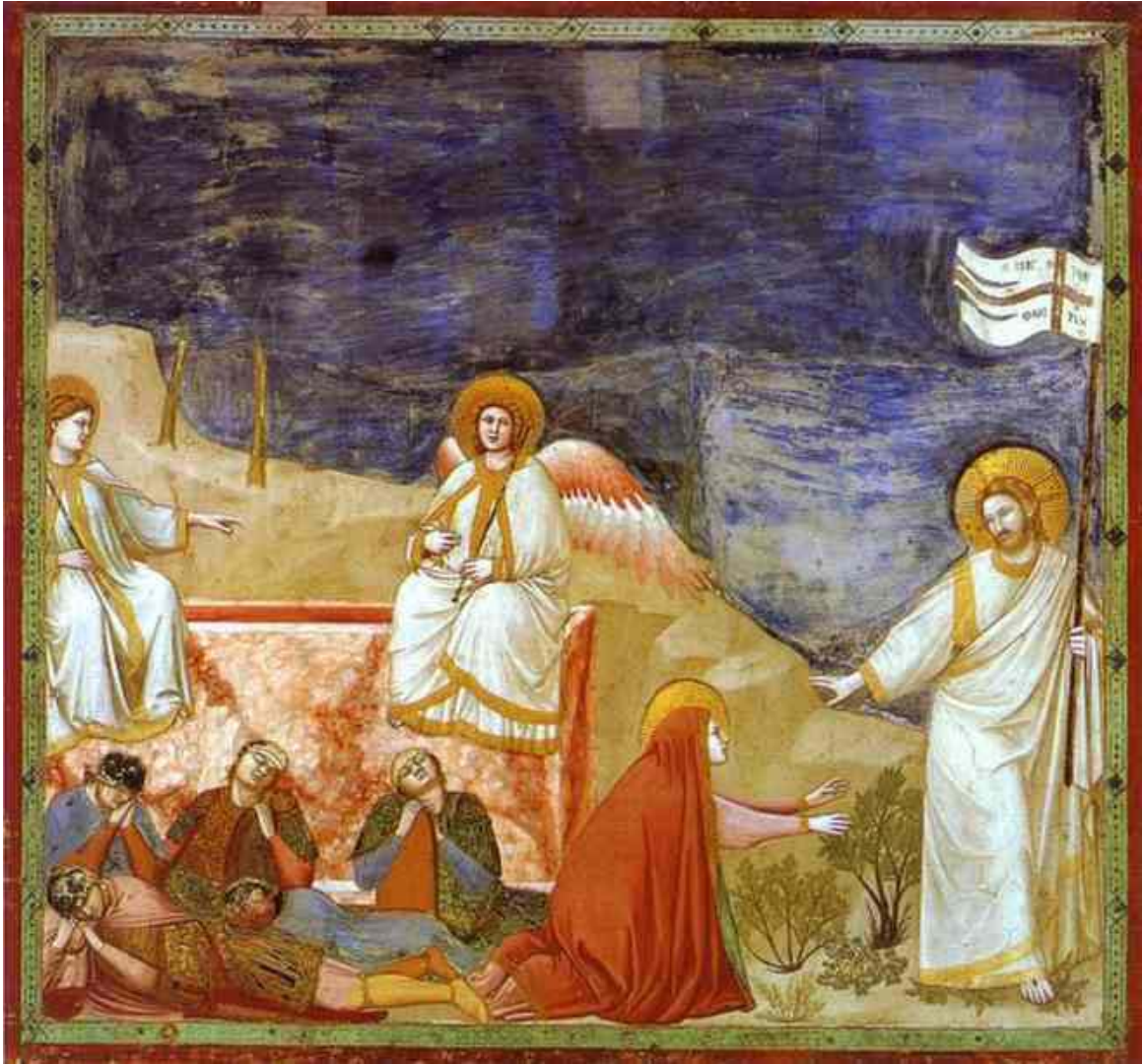


Figure 1. Giotto. *Noli Me Tangere*. c. 1305. Arena Chapel, Padua.

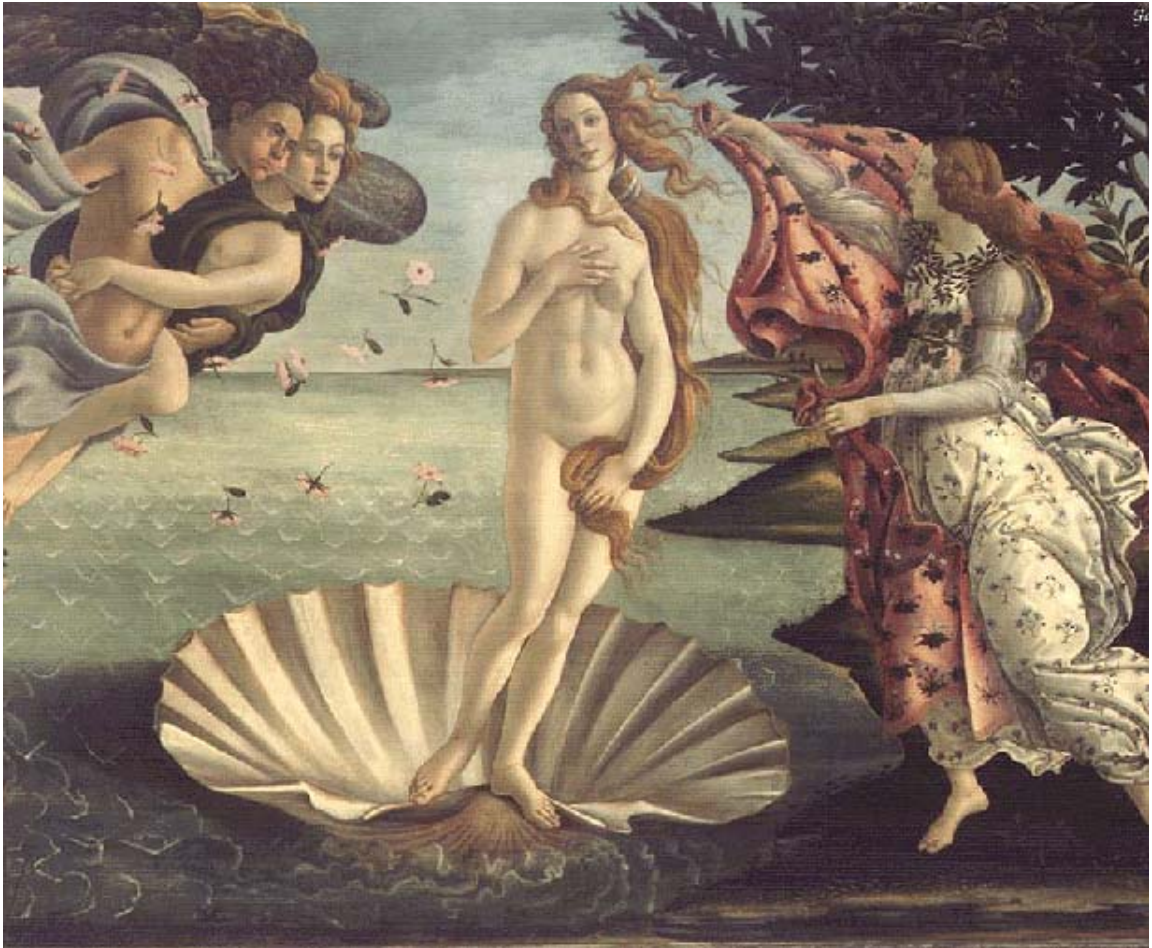


Figure 3. Botticelli. *Birth of Venus*. 1484-1486. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.





Figure 2. Botticelli. *La Primavera*. c. 1482. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.



Figure 4. Botticelli. *Noli Me Tangere*. 1484-1491. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.





Figure 5. Fra Angelico. *Noli Me Tangere*. 1440-1441. San Marco Monastery, Florence.





Figure 6. Correggio. *Noli Me Tangere*. 1525. Prado, Madrid.





Figure 7. Bronzino. *Noli Me Tangere*. 1561. Louvre, Paris.



Figure 8. Titian. *Noli Me Tangere*. 1512-1515. The National Gallery, London.



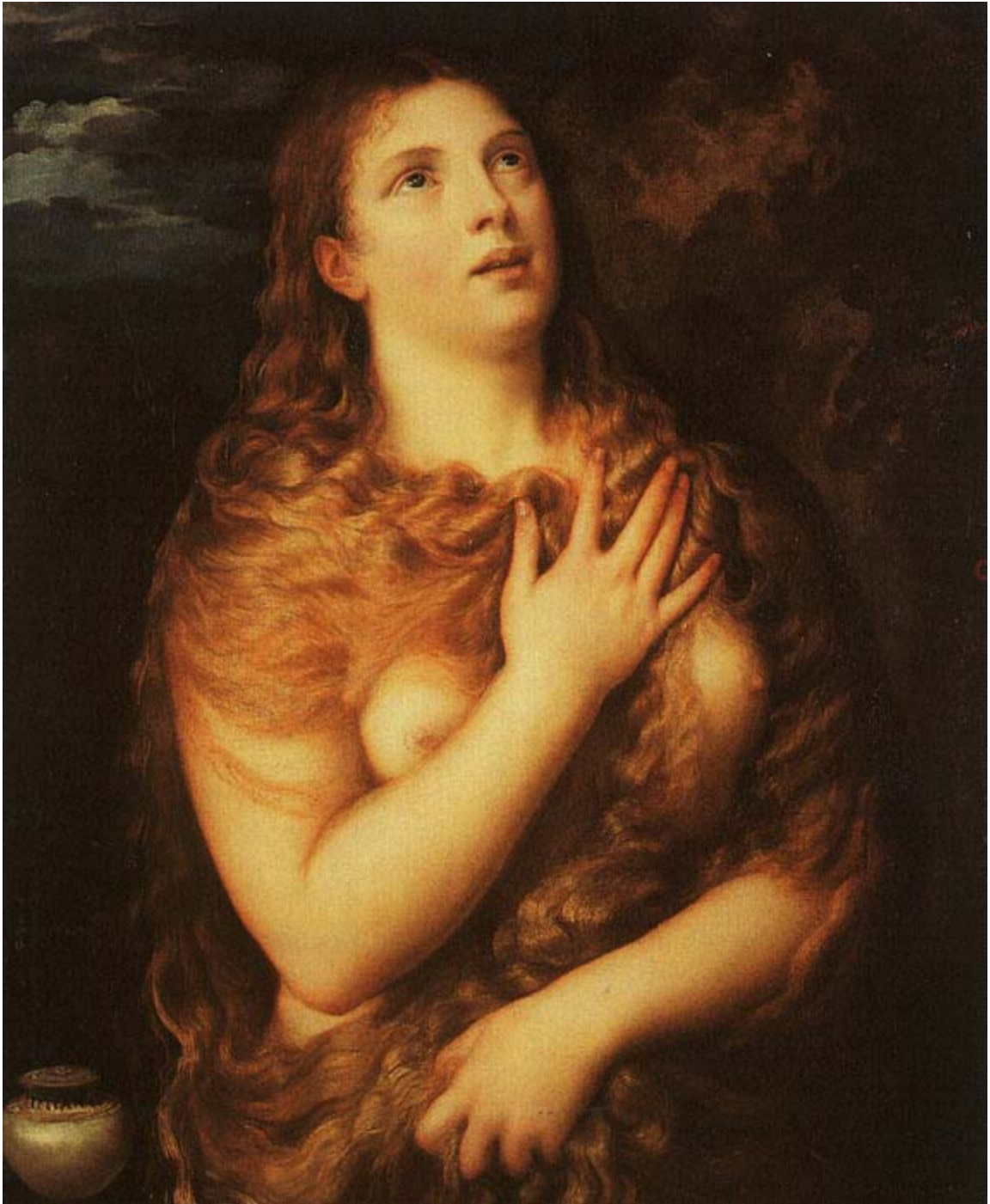


Figure 9. Titian. *St. Mary Magdalene*. 1533-1535. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.



Figure 10. Titian. *Venus Anadyomene*. 1520. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.



Figure 11. Titian. *Venus and Adonis*. 1553-1554. Prado, Madrid.





Figure 12. Lavinia Fontana. *Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalen*. 1581. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

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