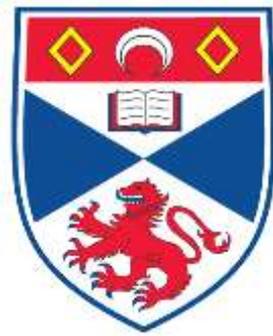


**INTERPRETING BREAST ICONOGRAPHY IN ITALIAN ART
1250-1600**

Anne M. Ashton

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St. Andrews**



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Interpreting Breast Iconography in Italian Art 1250-1600

Anne M. Ashton

Submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
At The
University of St. Andrews
7th April 2006



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Abstract

The motif of the uncovered female breast is ubiquitous in art of all ages and cultures. Modern analysis of breast imagery tends to be biased by the sexual significance that breasts have now. However in Italian renaissance art the exposed breast appears in many different manifestations. The purpose of this thesis is to explore several specific types of breast iconography.

The first chapter will examine images of *Maria lactans*, and consider the religious, cultural and psychological meaning held within the image and the social changes which were to lead to its loss of popularity. Chapter Two will consider the appearance of secular images of breastfeeding, particularly in the city-states of north Italy in the early Renaissance, and examine possible sociological reasons for the political use of the depiction of breastfeeding. Other associated breast iconography will also be considered. Chapter Three will focus on images of the tortured breast, particularly depictions of St. Agatha suffering the removal of her breasts during martyrdom. Both the sacred and sado-sexual elements of such images will be examined.

The fourth chapter will look at images of Lucretia. It will be examined why in so many cases artists chose to depict her with her breasts exposed (in contradiction to ancient sources) and with the dagger actually pointing at or embedded in her breast. It will be argued that the breast was used in art as external symbol of the female heart. The final chapter of the thesis will focus on paintings of Cleopatra. Again, there is an even more marked contradiction to ancient sources

when Cleopatra is depicted dying by a snakebite to the breast. A full-circle will be achieved in the contrast of paintings of Mary suckling Christ with images of Cleopatra apparently breastfeeding a snake.

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Abbreviations.

AASS *Acta Sanctorum*, Paris, 1866.

PL *Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina*, (on Bibliography: *Patrologia Latina*), 221 vols, J.P Migne ed., Paris 1841-1965.

Unless otherwise stated, German and Latin translations are by Charlie Ashton, French translation by Linda Orr and Italian translation by myself. All errors remain my own.

Introduction

The female breast is a unique part of the human anatomy. It cannot change its expression like a face; it cannot change its configuration like hands - it cannot communicate. It is a bland mound of flesh, broken only by a coin-sized darker area, with no muscle to affect movement. Yet its appearance, whether it be in art or life, signifies a multitude of meanings and has the potential to evoke deep emotion and extreme reactions.

In paintings and sculpture belonging to almost any era or categorisation of Western art, the naked female form is ubiquitous and the incidence of breast imagery in renaissance art is very high, not just in the obvious sexualised context, but also in images of breastfeeding and breast mutilation. This is an area which has been extensively analysed particularly during the last thirty years with the rise of feminist art history, but it appears that some basic misinterpretations of images of breasts have persisted.

It appears often to have been assumed that the preoccupations of the modern world were also the preoccupations of the past and that images containing breast iconography evoked similar reactions from people of the past to those they might now. This work reconsiders some of these assumptions. I chose to focus on Italian art from the period between 1250 and 1600 because during these three hundred and fifty years a major shift took place, centred in Italy, in relation to sex and the female body in art, a shift which brought thinking far closer to the contemporary attitude. I have isolated for consideration five female figures which are particularly associated with specific types of breast iconography that does not centre primarily on sexual connotations: Mary, the allegory of Charity, Agatha, Lucretia and Cleopatra. Each will be the focus of one of five chapters in which the breast iconography used in depictions of them,

and its meanings, associations and interconnections with other female characters will be examined. Many of the images considered are very famous and have been well analysed by art historians but have not been studied particularly in relation to each other. There are many other female figures from history and legend who have been made the subjects of art and who could have been included. Although I mention a selection, within the limits of a Ph.D. thesis it was not possible to be exhaustive.

The diversity of reaction to the female breast is the result of the perceived incompatibility of the two main associations with the breast: sexuality and maternity. Whilst the female breast was clearly always associated, to some extent negatively, with female sexuality - evidenced by the *Venus Pudica* pose and Ezekiel's condemnation of the cities Jerusalem and Samaria in the Old Testament - generally the primary historical connotations of the female breast have been positive, relating to the maternal, comforting, reassuring aspect of the stereotypical female character and linking, and even redeeming, all women.¹

From cultures dating back as far as we know and from all parts of the world, figures and images of large-breasted and breastfeeding women have been found.² An explanation may be that the one thing which has linked all cultures and societies of the past has been the threat of starvation. This threat no longer applies, in the Western world at least, perhaps for the first time in history. The implications of this obvious fact are very great and often underestimated in the analysis of breast iconography. The breast continues to produce food for an infant even when the mother is suffering from malnutrition and as a result,

¹According to Ezekiel, Jerusalem and Samaria 'committed whoredoms in their youth: there were their breasts pressed, and there they bruised the teats of their virginity.' Ezekiel, 4:24.

²See Yalom, 1997, 9-26 for a brief summary of breasts in pre-Christian art.

throughout history, has been used as a powerful symbol both of the reproductive powers of women and of freedom from the terror of starvation. Goddesses from Astarte to Athene, from Hera to Isis, were worshipped for their powers of fertility, reproduction and lactation.³ The Jewish God of the Old Testament was endowed with the female attribute of breasts in his title 'El Shaddiah', God with breasts, as an expression of his loving and beneficent nature, and later Christ was similarly envisioned by the Christian Fathers.⁴

The emergence of Mary as a loving mother figure to the Christian flock was in many ways a necessary continuation of a timeless tradition and, like most of her female predecessors, Mary's breast quickly became a focus for worship and love. The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the image of Mary suckling Christ, which gradually gained popularity from the time of early Christianity and which by the late Middle Ages was one of the most popular across Europe.

The phenomenon has been well covered by recent studies. In her book *Fragmentation and Redemption* Caroline Bynum argues against the idea that mediaeval people associated the female breast with sexuality and asserts that the main connotation of the breast was food.⁵ This association was developed into a highly theological meaning in images of Mary's breast: the significance of Mary's body, and particularly her breast, related to the Eucharist and parallels which can be drawn between Mary's body and the body of Christ.⁶ While not denying the many and complex theological meanings which underlay the image of *Maria lactans*, and endorsing Bynum's view on the primary food association of the breast to viewers of the late Middle Ages, this thesis does attempt to

³Yalom, 1997, 11-18.

⁴Yalom, 1997, 27. See Chapter One for Jesus with breasts and Bynum, 1991, 79-117 and more generally, 1982.

⁵Bynum, 1991, 86-87.

⁶Bynum, 1991, 79-117.

consider wider meanings inherent in the image which were perhaps more accessible to less educated viewers, and follows the development of the iconography to a point where sexuality does appear to become an element in images of *Maria lactans* in the late *Quattrocento*.

Margaret Miles, on the other hand, brought the breastfeeding Virgin into the real world in her 1986 article *The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture*. She stresses the wide range of meanings attached to the image and the social background to its popularity, taking into account the increasing trend of wetnursing and the chronic fear of starvation. But while she accepts that the Virgin's exposed breast would not have held primarily sexual significance, she argues that this was because of the conventions which guided the depiction of the Virgin's breast and ensured that the breast did not meet the erotic standards of the day. Far from being a matter of artistic convention, this thesis argues that it was the state of lactation which automatically disqualified it from sexual meaning. Powerful maternal and nutritional associations connected with the suckled breast overrode any sexual response to such images. Only when sexualised subject matter became popular among patrons of art in the late fifteenth century, and breasts began to make regular appearances as sexual attributes, did this matter become germane and again may have contributed to the loss of popularity which the image of *Maria lactans* suffered in the sixteenth century.

Also contentious is Miles's general conclusion that women were encouraged via the breastfeeding motif to identify with the Virgin Mary, but were also discouraged in literary texts from identifying with the power which the breastfeeding of Christ signified.⁷ The links between looking at an image of

⁷The rather negative conclusions which Miles came to in her 1986 article were

Mary feeding Christ and the actual act of sustaining a baby were complex and are extremely hard to evaluate more than five hundred years later. It was not a simple case of women thinking ‘Mary breastfed Christ, so I should breastfeed my own baby’ or men thinking ‘Mary breastfed Christ so my mother/wife/daughter should follow her example if she is a good woman’.

A major mistake that has been made in the interpretation of these breastfeeding images has been to assume that simply because breastfeeding was so necessary within society, connections between cultural breastfeeding practices and the appreciation of artistic depictions of breastfeeding were straightforward. There are many primary sources concerning everyday breastfeeding practices in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy and these have been eagerly mined to provide clues as to how images of *Maria lactans* were understood at the time. Unfortunately, the interpretation of these texts has, on occasion, been too literal and the increasing popularity of hiring wetnurses during the period has clouded the issues considerably. Did the use of wetnurses imply that many people found breastfeeding distasteful or disapproved of it in some way and, if so, why were they so obsessed with the idea of Mary breastfeeding Christ?

In fact women did identify with Mary as a mother but in a far more nebulous manner; the image of breastfeeding was a symbol of general good

reiterated in her book *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning*, in relation to a painting attributed to Carlo da Camerino now in the Cleveland Museum of Art. This painting includes a depiction of Mary enthroned and suckling Christ, with a reclining and naked figure of Eve below her feet. In this case Miles implies that ordinary women were expected to identify with the sinner Eve while Mary represented a fantasised perfect mother whom real women could not hope to emulate. Miles, 1991, 139-141. Beth Williamson has given this particular painting a more positive interpretation in her 1998 article *The Virgin Lactans as Second Eve Image of The Salvatrix*, in which she stresses the importance of Eve’s role in bringing about the incarnation of Christ and therefore the salvation of mankind.

mothering. Wetnursing trends actually give little information on how people felt about the nursing Madonna and the fact that the trend for wetnursing continued to grow in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is only tenuously linked with the declining popularity of the image of *Maria lactans*. Wetnursing was a matter of class differentiation and in the end, during the counter-reformation years, Mary could no longer belong to the lowly classes.

In her 1996 Ph.D. thesis *The Virgin Lactans and the Madonna of Humility in Italy, Metz and Avignon in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, and her subsequent article in *Apollo*, 'The Cloisters Double Intercession: the Virgin as Co-redemptrix', Beth Williamson returns to the theological strands of meaning inherent in the image of Mary's lactation and particularly stresses the importance of Mary's lactation in communicating her active role in the incarnation of Christ and her powers of intercession to worshippers.⁸ Williamson reassesses the origins of the images entitled 'Madonna of Humility', placing the original examples in French manuscripts, with particular reference to the Annunciation and the incarnation of Christ. Examples of the 'Madonna of Humility' often include the suckling of Christ and while Millard Meiss had argued that this was because it stressed the Virgin's humble nature, and Marina Warner went so far as to conclude that this was because the action of breastfeeding was viewed as a humiliating activity for women, Williamson takes issue with these conclusions and points out that in the early fourteenth century the rates of wetnursing were not yet high when the title 'Madonna of Humility' was first used, so that the word humility cannot refer to current feelings about breastfeeding.⁹ She argues that the word humility refers to the words the Virgin uses to describe herself after the Annunciation during the Visitation to Elizabeth,

⁸Williamson, 1996, and 2000. See also Williamson's 1998 article mentioned in the previous note.

⁹Meiss, 1964, 149-154; Warner, 1976, 201-202.

mother of St. John the Baptist, and so again refers particularly to the incarnation of Christ.¹⁰ She concludes that the breastfeeding iconography was used in depictions of the ‘Madonna of Humility’ because it too referred primarily to the incarnation, not because it was seen to be an act of humility.

Again, while the present thesis does not deny the complex theological significance of the image of *Maria lactans*, it does attempt to consider the readings of people who viewed the paintings without the benefit of extensive theological learning, perhaps particularly women and mothers, who may well have been aware of the important role the Virgin had in the salvation of mankind, but who would have had other immediate and far more personal reactions to the image. The implications of the title of humility given to many paintings of the breastfeeding Madonna are complicated and no doubt have theological significance. But to argue that many viewers did not relate inscriptions which included the word humility to the iconography within the paintings appears naive.

The image of Mary breastfeeding Christ could appeal to viewers on many levels from the highly intellectual to the commonly everyday. Viewers would not have to be well educated to understand much of the implications of the motif because breastfeeding was something everyone was very likely to have had some experience of.

Caroline Bynum, Margaret Miles and Beth Williamson all tend to concentrate on *Maria lactans* as she appeared in the fourteenth century and do not follow the image through the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth, when social conditions and artistic trends caused changes in the manner in which the

¹⁰Luke 1:48.

image was presented. Megan Holmes does attempt to examine these changes in her article 'Disrobing the Virgin: the Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art'.¹¹ Holmes claims that the development of realism in art in the first half of the fifteenth century meant that the breast of *Maria lactans* looked too much like a real breast and, as a result, very few images of *Maria lactans* were produced for some decades. When the image resurfaced towards the end of the century new devices were used to guard against the Virgin's uncovered breast invoking an erotic response from viewers. Holmes also examines the effects on the image of *Maria lactans* caused by the appearance of the figure of the wetnurse in art and the explosion in demand for sexual breasts in secular art which occurred at the end of the fifteenth century. She argues that increased popularity of cults connected with the Virgin's breast milk and the renewed popularity of the *Maria lactans* iconography at the end of the fifteenth century are connected to growing number of social, religious and visual discourses on the nursing of infants in regard to the issues of the increasing trend for wetnursing and concerns about female sexuality. While not disagreeing as such with Holmes' suppositions, this dissertation re-examines these issues and tries to set them in a wider context.

Chapter Two will consider sculptural images of breastfeeding which appeared in Tuscany particularly in the first half of the fourteenth century. So powerful was the significance of the breastfeeding motif in late mediaeval Italy that it was easily adapted and employed as an extremely effective political symbol. There is little known about the original function and placement of Tino di Camaino's personification of Charity breastfeeding two children (Florence, Museo Bardini), and surprisingly little attention has been paid to it by modern art historians. Perhaps this is because the iconography is perceived as being so

¹¹Holmes, 1997, 167-195.

unremarkable, produced as it was during the period when *Maria lactans* was at the height of popularity.

In 1948 Robert Freyhan charted the development of the iconography of personifications of the virtue Charity across Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; and described how artists strove to express the dual aspects of charity: *amor Dei* and *amor proximi*.¹² The main focus of his article was, however, the manner in which Italian representations of Charity were enriched by secular love symbols and the complexities of the sometimes opposing, sometimes united nature of celestial and profane love. While this is germane to many threads of this thesis - the link between pagan figures such as Venus, Christian figures such as Mary and the personification Charity and historical figures such as Cleopatra - Freyhan's work does not examine the breastfeeding iconography of Charity to any great depth, seeing it simply as a successful allegory of love between men. Indeed in 1977 Max Seidel argued that Giovanni di Balduccio's small quatrefoil relief of Charity, which was probably originally sited in Orsanmichele, was a more complex allegory, because it represents flames pouring from the heart of Charity representing the burning nature of love, both of God and man.¹³ The blurring of meaning between the heart and breast of a woman is a major theme in the present work, which also suggests that Tino's representation of Charity, precisely because it does not utilise symbols which also relate to sexual love, is more successful than personifications which included flame and light symbolism. His sculpture is simple, and yet highly complex.

¹²Freyhan, 1948, 68-86.

¹³Seidel, 1977, 62.

There must have been a very specific reason why Tino adopted the breastfeeding iconography in relation to Charity in Florence in the early part of the fourteenth century and thereby engendered a tradition initially confined to Florence but flowering across Italy in the subsequent century. It appears from the locations and implications of subsequent Florentine examples that Tino's sculpture may well have verged on representing a personification of the city of Florence itself for reasons which relate particularly to the strength of the political statement made by Tino's sculpture, the socio-environment of Florence and the implications of charitable activity in Florence during the course of the *Trecento*.

William Levin's 1983 Ph.D. thesis, *Studies in the Imagery of Mercy in Late Mediaeval Italian Art*, examines in great depth the connections between images and ideas surrounding the Madonna of Mercy, *Maria lactans* and personifications of Charity, and the manner in which milk signified the concept of mercy.¹⁴ He also explores the function of such visualisations in encouraging acts of charity between men. In his subsequent article 'Advertising Charity in the Trecento: the Public Decorations of the Misericordia in Florence' Levin further investigates the connections between confraternal charitable activity in Florence and iconography employed in the decoration of the building which housed the Compagna di Santa Maria della Misericordia with specific regard to the care of abandoned and orphaned children.¹⁵ Because this was the one of the highest priorities of such organisations, the breastfeeding motif was an element which appeared in the decoration of buildings with charitable functions.

In both of these works Levin states his belief that Tino's figure of breastfeeding *Charity* was located on the exterior of the Baptistery in Florence,

¹⁴Levin, 1983, 553-696.

¹⁵Levin, 1996, 215-309.

as Valentiner originally proposed in 1935 and with which Richard Kreytenberg has also recently concurred.¹⁶ It is, however, more generally believed at present that three fragments in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence are the virtue group that was in the Baptistery portal, and that the original location of the breastfeeding figure is unknown.¹⁷ In light of Levin's investigations into iconography associated with charitable organisations in Florence and with further consideration of the social relevance of the breastfeeding motif in fourteenth-century Florence, it seems a strong possibility that Tino's breastfeeding figure was associated with one of the Florentine charitable confraternities, perhaps the Compagna della Madonna di Orsanmichele - where the breastfeeding Charity appeared twice in the decades subsequent to the date of Tino's sculpture - or, indeed, the Compagna di Santa Maria della Misericordia, which was founded in 1321, around the time the sculpture appears to have been executed.¹⁸ The use of the breastfeeding Charity on the Loggia dei Lanzi at the end of the century demonstrates the overt political associations of such imagery, and reinforces the argument that such personifications of Charity verged towards personifications of Florence itself.

Of course, breastfeeding iconography, iconography generally associated with loving, gentle, femininity, was so employed by more than one major Italian city. Giovanni Pisano set the precedent in the early *Trecento* and used it several times in Pisa in major sculptural works which had civic as well as religious import. The most extensive modern studies of Giovanni's figures by Max Seidel explores the literary background to the use of the breastfeeding motif thoroughly.¹⁹ He acknowledges that elisions of meaning in personification

¹⁶Valentiner, 1935(a), 76-78; Kreytenberg, 1997, 4-12.

¹⁷Lusanna and Faedo, 1986, 225-227; Brunetti, 1969, 1, 229-230.

¹⁸Levin, 1997, 217.

¹⁹Seidel, 1977, 1987.

allegories were perhaps intentional on the part of artists, if not explicit. Once again, however, the level of education which would have been required to be as well versed in all the theological literary sources as Seidel no doubt is would have been quite high. Lesser educated viewers would have automatically made their own links between figures of any identity which were depicted breastfeeding and this would have resulted in slippages of meaning which crystallised over decades and centuries. This thesis attempts to focus on the depth and flexibility of breast iconography and the ease with which it communicated multiple meanings to all viewers and this is demonstrated by its appearance in these monumental public sculptures.

The use of such iconography, iconography imbued with the concept of love and which dated back to pre-Christianity, was innovative in public art and demonstrates the chronically unstable nature of political structures in late mediaeval northern Italy. Political messages communicated by civic art had to be clear and unambiguous and the breastfeeding motif was ideal for this purpose. The implications of Tino di Camaino's sculpture have received only superficial consideration by modern art historians, yet it may give a deep insight into the fears and concerns that plagued the governments of the independent city-states of north Italy in the late Middle Ages. This is again demonstrated by the two free-standing female figures which Jacopo della Quercia executed for the Fonte Gaia in Siena in the first decades of the fifteenth century. These two figures have never been satisfactorily identified; many female figures have been put forward as candidates over the centuries, and in particular James Beck has argued that they represent double aspects of Charity. This view diverges from the generally held modern view that they represent Rhea Silvia and Acca Larentia, the natural mother and foster-mother of the pagan twins Romulus and Remus.²⁰ Beck's

²⁰Beck, 1991, 1, 91-94, 165-166.

argument, however, rests on the splitting of the double meaning of charity into separate identities and although this did occur to some extent later in the *Quattrocento* and into the *Cinquecento*, the early date of the Sieneese fountain makes this unlikely. The multiplicity of meanings attached to breastfeeding iconography does make identification of some images difficult, but the iconography of bared breasts and small children on a publicly-funded sculpture ensures that the political message conveyed by the entire sculptural programme is easily read.

The use of breast iconography in prominent public positions in the fourteenth century reiterates the point that the lactating breast held little sexual significance during that period. The fact that these contemporary sculptures depict the breasts of Charity/Pisa/Ecclesia in three-dimensional reality very much calls into question suggestions that fourteenth-century paintings of Mary's breast were deliberately abstract to reduce sexual implications.²¹

Towards the end of the fifteenth century the figure of Charity began to merge with her pagan predecessors as well as retaining strong associations with the character of Mary. This change reflected both the change in artistic subject matter which occurred during the period and a more secularised view of charity within the culture. Abundance, Fertility and, in the sixteenth century, Roman Charity were all linked to the head of the theological Virtues, Christian Charity, often by breastfeeding iconography. As mentioned above, there also occurred a split in the personality of Charity akin to the two aspects of Venus: sacred and profane love. *Amor proximi* and *amor Dei* had always been considered aspects of Charity, but they tended to take on two completely separate characters during the High Renaissance, with the breastfeeding figure generally relating to more

²¹Miles, 1986, 193-208; Hollander, 1993, 178.

terrestrial and human love as opposed to spiritual love. This was a departure from ideas of the Middle Ages when breastfeeding was seen to bridge the two types of love and was related to spiritual matters in several senses.

The analysis of images of breast mutilation dating to the late mediaeval period is, in many ways, even more fraught with difficulties than that of images of breastfeeding, but in many senses the issues are the same and Chapter Three will examine them. Some writers on art history tend to underplay the implications of breast mutilation in scenes of St. Agatha's torture. Magdalena Carrasco examines one of the earliest surviving manuscript examples in her article on a late tenth century French *passio*, but she confines her observations to the early history of the image.²² Similarly, Liana de Girolami Cheney investigates the origins and activities of the cult of St. Agatha in her article of that title.²³ She discusses legal issues surrounding the trial of St. Agatha and one particular sixteenth-century cycle of the life of St. Agatha, but does not delve too deeply into the implications of the visualisation of forced mastectomy. But it is extremely easy for modern writers to jump to very negative conclusions about depictions of St. Agatha suffering mastectomy, as they appear to fit into some kind of sado-pornographic category, and the breasts portrayed belong to a young attractive girl, not a lactating mother. Although surprisingly little attention has been paid to these images, what has been written appears to emphasise negative interpretations.²⁴

Although mention of St. Agatha and her mutilation appears in many hagiographical studies, the singularly most penetrating investigation has been made by Martha Easton in her 1994 article 'Saint Agatha and the Sanctification

²²Carrasco, 1985, 19-32.

²³Cheney, 1996, 3-9.

²⁴Easton, 1994; Miles, 1992, 156.

of Sexual Violence'. In this article she argues that theological interpretations of images of St. Agatha have tended to ignore the gaze of the viewer and that as late mediaeval and renaissance viewers would not all have been well versed in the religious doctrine behind such images, they may have had responses which were not as the artists intended and which may be similar to a modern response to scenes of sexual violence. She insists on investing the female breast, even in religious mediaeval images, with a primary sexual import, while connections between various female personae made via breast symbolism are characterised as resting on their sexual nature.

Although Easton's applications of psychoanalytic theory to images of breast mutilation are interesting, they can be no more than speculation. We simply do not know how the layers of psyche in individual mediaeval and renaissance people worked and it is very difficult to get even a glimpse of their unconscious mental mechanisms. Given the very different social and cultural structures and contexts of the time, the religious conditioning and complex attitudes to women, we must continue to work with the facts that we can more or less establish even if we will never reach an absolute truth about any aspect of history.

Margaret Miles also has a rather negative view of the depiction of female saints in general and those who suffered breast mutilation in particular.²⁵ While it is perhaps undeniable that attempts were made to control and condition women, (and men) through artistic imagery during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, she is somewhat wide of the mark in her description of images of breast mutilation as 'religious pornography'.

²⁵Miles, 1986, 56-57, 156.

The present study will attempt to give a more balanced survey of possible interpretations of images of St. Agatha. Breasts did not have overriding erotic connotations during the late mediaeval period and pain and torture were not considered to be entirely negative experiences. This is what this Chapter tries to explore in relation to images of St. Agatha's mastectomy. St. Agatha is another manifestation of the Virgin Mary and also of Christ, and the flesh of her breasts was viewed as sacrosanct, as was their flesh. Although Agatha was young, attractive and unmarried, the predominant import of her breasts in narratives of her martyrdom was the association with possible motherhood, spiritual nourishment and food.

Christianity in particular appears to have blatantly encouraged a culture of mutilation and self-harm, but for reasons which are very difficult to understand today. Again, Caroline Bynum's research has examined the subject of the physical female body in relation to religious experience for women in the late mediaeval and renaissance period, and while it may be said that her emphasis is on the lives of holy women, relatively a minority of the population, people were generally more subject to the physical body and all its vulnerabilities than we perceive ourselves to be in the modern West.²⁶ This partially explains attitudes to pain and suffering during the late Middle Ages and strangely paradoxical Christian doctrine in relation to the human body. Imitation of Christ and his martyred saints was a method of coping with the general hardship of life. Torture and execution were acceptable parts of the legal system and also a part of the suffering which was a gift from God. If suffering was endured and even embraced, entry into heaven and escape from pain was likely to come all the sooner. Mitchell Merback's recent research on late mediaeval depictions of the

²⁶See particularly Bynum, 1987 and 1991.

Crucifixion is a useful starting point for consideration of how scenes of pain and humiliation related to the everyday lives of viewers of an image.²⁷

Christianity encouraged worship of Mary at her most lowly, seated on the ground breastfeeding Christ, and at the heart of this image was an expression of her power; this paradox ran throughout Christian doctrine. Agatha was reduced to the lowest physical state, but like Mary and Christ on the cross, this state is an expression of her power. Stripped and battered she constituted a symbol of hope which was enhanced by the fact that it was her breasts which had been attacked; in themselves symbols not only of her chastity but also her womanhood and possible motherhood and a link to the Virgin Mary. Cult images of Agatha and passion plays narrating her story gave crowds a visual experience which was designed to increase their horror and therefore their wonder and enhance their religious devotion. To reduce these images to mere sado-pornography is a mistake.

This is not to deny that some viewers may have experienced unlicensed reactions to images of breast mutilation, nor that the popularity of such images was in some senses a symptom of cultural imbalances, particularly between men and women. But as well as having possible negative readings, positive readings were also possible for women who perhaps wanted to find an alternative route to the traditional path of marriage and motherhood.

Once into the sixteenth century, however, when sexualised subject matter became commonplace in art, the ambivalence which always hung over images of breast mutilation became more acute and condemnation not only of such scenes

²⁷Merback, 1999.

but of all depictions of unnecessary nakedness in religious art resulted in Agatha no longer appearing in a state of mutilated undress.

Chapters Four and Five of the thesis consider images of two very different women: the ancient Roman, Lucretia, and the Egyptian Queen, Cleopatra. This is because of the recurring connection between suicide and breasts in many depictions of these women dating the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is a huge interdisciplinary bibliography on both Lucretia and Cleopatra. What is different about the present study is that it attempts to interpret fifteenth- and sixteenth-century images of the two women particularly in the context of breast iconography and in the light of the interpretations applied to images of the female subjects in the first three chapters. It will be attempted to show that any generalised condemnation of the images as a group, under the heading of sadopornography, is again unfounded because of the implications of breast imagery.

Ian Donaldson has conducted the most comprehensive interdisciplinary study of Lucretia to date, concentrating on the adoption of her tale within changing social contexts.²⁸ He examines how, throughout the centuries, literary and artistic images of Lucretia have reflected contemporary debates on issues such as the nature of women, rape and suicide and stresses that images of Lucretia do not reflect real life but create a mythology which is nothing to do with womens' real reaction to rape or the mental state which drives the rape victim to suicide.

Donaldson is certainly accurate in his assessment of the manner in which the story of Lucretia has been manipulated. For Christians the pagan

²⁸Donaldson, 1982.

heroine of republican Rome constituted a bridge between virtuous women of the antique period and Christian female martyrs such as Agatha. But for several reasons ambiguity hung over her head throughout Christian history: in the first place she was raped and in the second she committed suicide. This may explain, to some extent, why paintings of her suicide so often depicted her with bared breasts and the dagger either pointing at or embedded in the soft flesh of the breast despite the fact that primary sources give little evidence to suppose she was in a state of undress at the moment of her death. Once again, breast iconography is employed to express wide-ranging and, in this case, somewhat contradictory ideas. Breast symbolism can hover between virtuous and sexual meaning.

This is emphasised by the fact that Lucretia's bared breasts first appeared in depictions of her rape on decorative narrative side panels of marriage chests in the first half of the fifteenth century. In her book *Cassone Painting, Humanism and Gender in Early Modern Italy* Cristelle Baskins examines the complex and ambiguous meanings inherent in depictions of Lucretia on *cassoni* and the manner in which they worked through this female figure, who was both chaste and sexualised at one and the same time, to ensure stable families and stable political structures in the fifteenth century.²⁹ Baskins does not focus particularly on the implications of the breast imagery associated with Lucretia, however, seeing the body of Lucretia as undeniably eroticised in such images. But she does mention the alignment of Lucretia's breast wound with the side wound of Christ in some images and this has profound repercussions for the study of breast imagery.³⁰

²⁹Baskins, 1998, 128-159.

³⁰Baskins, 1998, 151-152.

In the context of *cassone* painting Lucretia's breast represented her innocence and impending victimisation and doom. Lucretia's story was perfect subject matter for marriage chests because not only was she a wife and as such sexually active and willing to provide heirs for her husband, but she was also so virtuous that she was willing to die to preserve her honour. The paradox of meaning which applies to the breast, symbol of virtue and sexuality, applied in a wider sense to Lucretia.

An image of a woman stabbing herself in the bared breast presents a poignant and poetic scene because the breast represents the essentially female part of herself. But Lucretia, like Charity, was also employed as a powerful political symbol by the city of Florence. Appropriately, the independent city state which identified itself with personifications of breastfeeding Charity in the fourteenth century also identified itself in the fifteenth century with the woman who was willing to stab herself in the breast to defend her chastity and ultimately to free Rome. Several writers, including Walton, Miziolek, and Lightbown have examined this in detail, but once again have not considered how the breast iconography complemented and emphasised such political content.³¹ On Botticelli's marriage chest panel narrating scenes from the life of Lucretia, her impaled breast, in the dead centre of the panel, represents not only the personal tragedy of the woman and the implications of rape within a society structured around family dynasties and honour, but also the defence of republicanism against tyranny.

However, the ambiguity hanging over Lucretia deepened in the sixteenth century, not only in artistic images but also in literature concerning her.

³¹Walton, 1965; Lightbown, 1989, 260-269; Miziolek, 1996(a) and (b).

Lucretia was not actually a Christian figure and she did engage in sexual activity, whether willingly or not. The erotic element which appeared in images of Venus and other pagan figures in the sixteenth century could far more legitimately also be used in images of Lucretia than in images of Mary or even Agatha. Once more, charges of pornography have been made against paintings which seem to dwell on bared female breasts threatened at dagger's point.³² But again such charges are anachronistic. In her study of the work of Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Garrard provides a broad survey of images of Lucretia painted in the late Renaissance and attributes their appeal to their sadopornographic content. She argues that images of the death of Lucretia reveal a fascination with female suicide which is exploitative, playing to both the misogynist and erotic tastes of their male audience.

But pornography is made with the distinct and conscious aim of sexually titillating viewers and while this may be said of some paintings of nude or semi-nude women made in the sixteenth century, it cannot be said of all paintings of Lucretia in a state of undress and on the point of suicide. In many cases this is made more, not less, true by the utilisation of breast symbolism with its depth of meanings and associations.

As David Rosand has argued, images of human beings in extreme states of emotion were used in the sixteenth century to invoke empathy and were contemplated and meditated on in a manner similar to religious icons.³³ They were also intellectual aids to understanding the human condition. Some artists, who attempted to express the complexities of Lucretia's extreme suffering via

³²Garrard, 1989, 210-239; Emison, 1991, 272; Hults, 1991, 205-207.

³³Rosand, 1994, 34-52.

her naked suicide, or even in scenes of her rape, cannot be charged with straightforward pornography.

Lucretia, like Mary, Charity and Agatha, was willing to sacrifice her flesh for the sake of virtue and the preferred use of the breast as the site of her sacrifice in so many paintings and sculptures of her connects her to these other female figures, no matter how complex the issues surrounding her suicide. The same is true in some senses of Cleopatra, although she represented an antithetical figure to Lucretia and Mary. Lucy Hughs-Hallet has written an interdisciplinary book on Cleopatra, considering the many forms the myth of her life has taken, their contradictory facets, and how images of her in whatever manifestation reflect the belief codes of the societies which produced them.³⁴ She points out that even at her most wicked, Cleopatra has a fascinating attraction and this is reflected in the ambivalence of images of her, be it in literature, painting or film.

When she first began to appear in Italian art, in the late fifteenth century, Cleopatra was utilised to demonstrate very contemporary concerns such as wifely infidelity and disobedience and she evidently represented a personification of the vices of Lust or Luxury, often juxtapositioned with Lucretia - a personification of Chastity at that stage. Mary Hamer has examined the way in which images of Cleopatra were adapted during the Renaissance to conform to contemporary concerns (specifically, appropriate womanly behaviour and wifely chastity) particularly in relation to the Ulm Boccaccio print illustrating the Life of Cleopatra.³⁵

³⁴Hughs-Hallet, 1990.

³⁵Hamer, 1993.

The present study applies this theory to Piero di Cosimo's painting, believed by many to be a portrait of Simonetta Vespucci (Chantilly, Musée Condé, fig.179), and finds that it is in fact an allegorical depiction of Cleopatra personifying Lust/Luxuria. Cleopatra was guilty of these vices and could expect to suffer serpents biting at her breasts and genitals in hell. The difficulty in identifying female figures in images which include exposure of their breasts is again an issue in regard to this painting, because the various meanings of breast iconography are so contradictory, ranging from the highly chaste to the markedly sexual. When represented in a portrait Simonetta Vespucci would have desired to be represented as the former, but fifteenth century images of Cleopatra would have pertained to the latter. Sharon Fermor has more or less dispelled the idea that Piero's painting represents Simonetta, mainly because it is too sensual and erotic and actually subverts conventions of fifteenth-century Florentine portraiture rather than fitting comfortably within the genre.³⁶ She argues that the image is didactic in tone despite its visual appeal and highlights both the danger and attraction of the figure of Cleopatra. The present thesis aligns itself with and extends these arguments, pointing to the breast iconography as the element which facilitates such contradictory implications.

As with Lucretia, artists of the late fifteenth century and sixteenth century chose to disregard the main antique sources, which reported that Cleopatra was well dressed when she died and that she probably committed suicide by holding asps to her arm. Instead they chose to depict her, in a majority of examples, holding snakes to her breasts, in many cases to her nipples as if suckling the snake, as was reported by some later sources.

³⁶Fermor, 1993, 93-100.

Both Lucy Hughs-Hallet and, again, Mary Garrard see this fascination with the breasts and death of Cleopatra as pornographic. Although Hughs-Hallet acknowledges a link between the image of Cleopatra applying snakes to her breasts and *Maria lactans*, she sees it as negative and even blasphemous.³⁷ Garrard similarly identifies the links between the snake/breast iconography and ancient symbolism associated with Isis, but argues that only in the case of Artemisia Gentileschi's depictions of Cleopatra is the Queen's royal and mythic heritage truly reflected.

While it cannot be denied in the case of Cleopatra that renaissance depictions of her were highly eroticised, they still cannot be described as straightforward sadopornography. The fact that both Lucretia and Cleopatra were depicted as dying by a self-inflicted wound to the breast, contrasting to the oldest sources, appears to be too much of a coincidence and suggests connections between these two figures and, by extension, with other female figures associated with breast iconography which are not entirely negative in character but are instead highly ambiguous, bridging good and evil characteristics. It is significant that Cleopatra breastfed snakes while Mary breastfed Christ. The snake motif immediately connects Cleopatra with the Christian anti-heroine Eve, and via her with Mary, the new Eve. Eve herself was condemned to the pains of birth and the humiliation of breastfeeding through her association with the snake. But Eve, and perhaps also Cleopatra, were redeemed in the light of Mary. The breast iconography which connects these three female figures also connects Cleopatra to the Egyptian goddess Isis, another precursor of Mary, of whom Cleopatra was supposed to be the human embodiment. Like Mary, Isis breastfed a god, her son Horus. Once more there emerges an interconnectedness of breast symbolism which embraces all womankind, whether good or evil.

³⁷Hughs-Hallet, 1990, 152.

While Lucretia and even Agatha may have lost some of their sanctity in eroticised images of the sixteenth century, the changes of that era gave Cleopatra, along with other pagan figures such as Venus, some rehabilitation and she became in literature and in art a heroine of love rather than a straightforward wicked woman. Breast iconography successfully spans the distance between all women, whether they were perceived to be good or evil, from the distant pagan past or the Christian present.

The breast represents the essential feminine, infinitely comforting but also at times deeply threatening to men, reminding them of a time when they were entirely dependent on the unique power of woman to generate food as if from nothing. The breast also represents an outer symbol of the female heart with its ability to give love unconditionally and as such is uniquely expressive when it appears in art.



fig.1 Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Maria lactans*, c1332, Siena, Museo diocesano, Oratorio di San Bernardino.

Chapter One: *Maria lactans*.

Around 1332 Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted an image of *Maria lactans*, which is today one of his most famous and well-loved works (Siena, Museo diocesano, Oratorio di San Bernardino, fig.1).¹ It depicts Mary in a state of lactation, producing milk after the birth of Christ. Modern art historians, when writing about Ambrogio's painting, comment on the popularity of the iconography and Ambrogio's admirable ability to create an intimate and realistic scene full of loving tenderness and even prescience of the future. But how did Ambrogio's contemporaries read this image, and what were the emotions evoked by the sight of the Virgin Mary suckling the son of God?

In Italy before the *Duecento* images of *Maria lactans* remained rare but became popular towards the end of the century, and throughout the *Trecento* were produced in great number, judging from surviving numbers.² The volume of images produced decreased markedly around the middle of the *Quattrocento* and although the motif regained currency in the latter quarter and into the *Cinquecento*, it never again achieved the heights of popularity it had previously enjoyed and eventually its appearance in art more or less ceased, in Italy at any rate. Variations on the theme developed between the *Duecento* and *Cinquecento*, all with linked but subtly differing significance.

¹Péter, 1980, 223-261; Chelazzi Dini, Angelini and Sani, 1998, 148. This panel was possibly originally part of a polyptych and came from the Augustinian hermitage at Lecceto, see Cannon, 1994, 45.

²There are 86 surviving examples on the Princeton Index of Christian Art and Beth Williamson has found 32 more, for a list see Williamson's appendices, 1996, 319-324. For many illustrations see Shorr, 1954, 58-77. These sources refer mainly to fourteenth-century examples and are not comprehensive.

In recent years the iconography of *Maria lactans* has drawn much attention from scholars, who have tried to unravel the web of meaning attached to these images and to place them in historical context - some more successfully than others.³ The long theological and artistic history of breastfeeding iconography, and its wide significance, from the mundanely domestic to the deeply esoteric, makes for particularly multi-layered interpretations. In modern analysis there has also been speculation about the implications of images which include the exposure of what is, today, indisputably a site of sexual significance.

This first chapter will attempt to establish the significance of Mary's breast in the context of late mediaeval and renaissance Italy. Instead of focusing in on one particular aspect of breastfeeding iconography it will consider the diversity of implications and the wide appeal of the ancient symbolism. A brief summary of the theological and artistic history of lactation imagery will be used to illuminate its developing relevance in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. This will be followed by an examination of the messages the image of *Maria lactans* was intended to convey, how it was actually used and understood and its association with contemporary breastfeeding practices. Finally, an examination of the changing social circumstances and function of art will illustrate why the motif of Mary nursing Christ became far less popular in the *Cinquecento*.

In the modern world the issue of breastfeeding is not only highly emotive and considered to be of complex psychological importance, it is also, in some senses, a

³See for instance: Levin, 1983, 546-788; Miles, 1986, 193-208; Holmes, 1997, 167-195 and Williamson, 1996; 1998, 105-138 and 2000, 48-54. See Bonani, 1995, for an extensive bibliography on the subject.

world-wide political issue. This undoubtedly colours our interpretations of mediaeval and renaissance paintings of Mary nursing Christ and our assumptions about how such images were read in the past. This initial chapter will attempt to demonstrate the breadth of meaning conveyed by images of *Maria lactans* in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, taking issue with some modern analysts who have perhaps been too definitive.

Theological and Artistic History

The development of the cult of Mary is well known and extensively covered by modern scholarship and only a brief summary is necessary here. The Council of Ephesus in 431 AD officially titled her God Bearer and feast days in her honour were introduced in Rome between c650 and 700 AD and gradually spread across Europe.⁴ Many miracles attributed to Mary were reported and representations of her in art were produced in growing numbers from the early Middle Ages.⁵

From an early date devotion to Mary was strongly emotional.⁶ As a female character, amongst the range of prominent male figures in the hierarchy of Christianity, and as a mother who suffered the death of her son, Mary elicited the deepest empathy. She also became identified with Sophia, a female personification of

⁴Miegge, 1955, 53-67; Carroll, 1986, 5; Cameron, 2000, 6. For Mary's early history see Agourides, 2000, 59-65 and for a detailed examination of the development of the role of Mary in the Christian church see Cameron, 2000, 3-15. Also Budge, 1922; Miegge, 1955; Chaine, 1961-62; Graef, 1963; Rouillard, 1967 and Limberis, 1994.

⁵Cameron, 2000, 6.

⁶Cameron, 2000, 9-13.

Wisdom, and Ecclesia, the Mother Church who could extend tender maternal protection to the faithful.⁷

The persona of *Maria lactans* emerged early in the history of Christianity.⁸ The first description of Mary's birth, childhood and life until just after the birth of Christ, was provided by the second century apocryphal gospel of St. James, which confirms that Mary breastfed Christ: '... he (Christ) took the breast of his mother Mary'.⁹ During the same century, or possibly into the third, the earliest known instance of an artistic representation of the nursing Virgin was executed in Italy (fig.2).¹⁰ It is a small wall painting in the Catacombs of S. Priscilla, in Rome depicting a naturalistic scene of a mother and baby. A second standing figure, a prophet, points to a star; the message is understood to be that the birth of Christ

⁷Warner, 1976, 194; Kalavrezou, 2000, 41-45. See the *Hymns of Romanos* written in the sixth century by Ephraim the Syrian, deacon of Hagia Sophia, whose phraseology helped to form artistic Byzantine iconography, see Cameron, 2000, 9. Also the *Akathistos* hymn, written sometime between the fifth and seventh centuries, which constitutes an adaptation of Luke's interpretation of Gabriel's address to Mary at the Annunciation, including Mary being described as 'the beautiful nursing-mother of virgins' (v.19). Many of the theological ideas surrounding Mary and her status and powers are expressed within the hymn, see Limberis, 1994, 149-158, for a full translation.

⁸This is unsurprising, given that, as St. Clement of Alexandria pointed out 'Milk is the spring that gives nourishment. By its presence, a woman is known to have given birth and become a mother, and therefore, it bestows on her a certain loveliness that arouses reverence.' Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, 1954, 6:49.

⁹*The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 1995, James, 19:16. See also Karavidopoulos, 2000, 67-76. There are references to breastfeeding in the official Gospels but these, for the most part, are very general. The only explicit reference to the actual breastfeeding of Christ is found in Luke 11:27-28 - 'Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast suckled' cried a woman in a crowd listening to the adult Jesus preaching. But Jesus replied 'Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it.'

¹⁰For a recent study of this image see Moffitt, 1997, 77-87. For detailed accounts of the origins of the image of Mary suckling Christ see Lasareff, 1938, 26-65 and Cutler, 1987, 335-350. See also Baltoyanni, 2000, 139-153.

fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies.¹¹ The Messiah had taken the form of a human being, born to a woman.

The actual form of Mary's motherhood and the extent to which the infant Christ was human and dependent on his Mother caused disagreement among the Early Christian Fathers. St. Clement of Alexandria, writing around the same time as the author of James' *Infancy Gospel*, states:

‘And one alone, too, is the virgin Mother. I like to call her the church. She alone, although a mother, had no milk because she alone never became a wife. She is at once a virgin and a mother; as virgin undefiled; as mother, full of love. Calling her children about her, she nourishes them with milk that is holy: the infant Word. That is why she has no milk, because this Son of hers, beautiful and all hers, the Body of Christ, is milk.’¹²

This suggests that the actual physical production of milk would have defiled Mary's purity. St Augustine, on the other hand, writing in the fourth century, believed that the fact that Mary was a virgin who produced milk, as well as retaining her virginity before and during marriage and during pregnancy and birth, was all part of the mystical miracle of the birth of Christ.¹³ The eventual prevalence of the doctrine that Christ literally became human during his incarnation, and assumed all the natural weaknesses and vulnerability of mankind, ensured that St. Augustine's view of the breastfeeding of Christ won out over Clement's. St. John Chrysostom, in the later

¹¹Isaiah, 11:1. See also Numbers, 24:17; Moffitt, 1997, 79-80.

¹²Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, 1954, 6:42. The translator states in the notes that the text is defective here (n.54). However, the general theme of Clement appears clear.

¹³St. Augustine, ‘De Tempore’, *PL*, 38, 188:5:3.

fourth century, explicitly connects Christ's humanity with his dependence on human milk as an infant:

'[Christ] deigned to become a man, and to take flesh formed of the earth and clay, and enter the womb of a virgin, and be borne there the space of nine months, and be nourished with milk, and suffer all things to which a man is liable.'¹⁴

In fact, throughout Christian history, milk itself was a recurrent symbol used to represent divine nourishment.¹⁵ Believing that milk is transmuted blood, writers such as Clement were able to link it with the Eucharist, encouraging the faithful to eat and drink of the body of Christ which represented his teaching and his sacrifice for mankind, both given in divine love, which is most akin to the love of a mother for her baby.¹⁶

Because of its apparently miraculous production, milk was seen as a pure and perfect food.¹⁷ The doubly miraculous nature of Mary's milk and the implication that she not only gave life to, but also sustained, mankind's saviour, ensured that the

¹⁴John Chrysostom, *Against Marcionists and Manichaeans*, 1996, 3, 205.

¹⁵See for instance Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, 1954, 6:35.

¹⁶Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, 1954, 6:38-41. The belief that breastmilk was transmuted blood was derived from contemporary medical textbooks, see Jacquot, 1988, 12, 34, 42-43, 72, 125. St. Augustine also used this type of metaphor two hundred years later: 'He [Christ] has promised us meat in heaven, but here he brings us up on milk, treating us with a mother's tenderness. What is a mother doing in fact, when she suckles her infant? She is using her own flesh and blood to turn into milk for him the solid food he's not ready for. In the same way the Lord turned eternal Wisdom into milk for us, by coming to us in the flesh.' St. Augustine, 'Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi Enarrationes in Psalmos' *PL*, 36, 30:2:1, translation from *Nine Sermons of Saint Augustine on the Psalms*, 1958, 116.

¹⁷Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, 1954, 6:36.



fig.2 *Maria lactans*, 2nd-3rd century, Rome, Catacombs of S. Priscilla.



fig.3 *Maria lactans*, c.893-895, Fayum, Egyptian manuscript, Ms.574.



fig.4 Roman School, *Maria lactans*, 12th century, Rome, S. Maria in Trastevere.



fig.5 Magdalen Master, *Maria lactans*, 13th century, New Haven, Yale University Library.

concept of Christ being breastfed became laden with spiritual significance. References to the milk of the Virgin continued to appear in theological writing throughout the early Middle Ages. Mary's miraculous lactation implied Christ's divinity, his incarnation, his humanity and his love and sacrifice for mankind; it also represented Mary's love for Christ as a mother and her sacrifice for mankind to whom she offered a form of divine nourishment. All this was inherent in the image of *Maria lactans* and even more ramified significance became attached to it during the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, both in literature and art.

The Development of the Image in the Later Middle Ages.

There is some evidence that other images of the type found in the Catacombs of St. Priscilla in Rome were produced by early Christian artists of the West, although no examples survive.¹⁸ During the early and high mediaeval period the motif of the nursing Virgin did occur in the Christian East but the Byzantine iconic form of the *Galactotrophousa* was an 'exceptional type, not the general one' according to Victor Lasareff.¹⁹ However, in Christian Egypt the nursing Virgin certainly appeared in art quite regularly throughout the first millennium, as in, for example, an Egyptian manuscript from Fayum dating to c.893-895 (fig.3).²⁰ This was probably due to the

¹⁸Although there is a second third-century image in the catacombs of St. Priscilla which may represent a nursing Virgin, see Lasareff, 1938, 28, 30 and n.21. See also Levin, 1983, 608-609 and Baltoyanni, 2000, 141.

¹⁹Lasareff, 1938, 30. According to Lasareff, the motif was more popular in the Greek provinces than in Constantinople, Lasareff, 1938, 33. This perhaps indicates that an image of breastfeeding had such a domestic connotation that it appealed to less sophisticated people.

²⁰From a Synaxary Fragment of a manuscript of St. John Chrysostom's *Eulogy for*

fact that there existed the pre-Christian tradition of worshipping nursing images, in particular the goddess Isis and her son, Horus.²¹ However, in contrast to the very domestic image in the Roman Catacomb, and the strongly emotive Byzantine icons which stressed the maternal aspects of Mary, examples from Coptic manuscripts of the eighth century are frontal, distant and hieratic.²² Mary and Christ are simply abstract symbols of divinity and the Virgin's breast is generally very small.

Both Coptic and Byzantine influences may have been responsible for the spread of the motif of *Maria lactans* in the West.²³ In twelfth-century Italian examples, such as the mosaic on the facade of S. Maria in Trastevere, Christ sits upright in a rather adult manner, so that, although suckling, he does not appear completely vulnerable as a new-born baby would be (fig.4).²⁴ Furthermore his often regal look towards the audience suggests that he was born with some knowledge of his identity and destiny. His divinity, as opposed to his humanity, is still paramount in such images.

the Feast of the Four Incorporeal Animals, Ms 574, see the *Exhibition of Illuminated Manuscripts Held at the New York Public Library*, Pierpont Morgan Library 1933, 1, 3. See also Baltoyanni, 2000, 141-142 and Loverdou-Tsigarida, 2000, 258, for further examples of Byzantine and Egyptian nursing Virgins.

²¹For information on the influence of the Cult of Isis on devotion to Mary see Miegge, 1955, 77-82; James, 1959, 174ff; Tran Tam Tinh, 1973, *passim*; Ashe, 1976, 19-22, *passim*; Warner, 1985, *passim*.; Carroll, 1986, particularly 8-10, 111-112; Buono, 1987, 85-95; Benko, 1993, particularly 43-53; Langener, 1996, *passim*. On the transformation of pagan goddesses into Mary see Borgeaud, 2004.

²²Cutler, 1987, 346.

²³See Lasareff, 1938, 28-29, for a fuller description of the cross-currents of artistic influence between the East and the West in the early Middle Ages, and further early examples of the *Maria lactans* image.

²⁴Shorr, 1954, 60.

In early *Duecento* examples the Child continues to sit erect (or occasionally kneels or stands) and although he often looks upward towards Mary rather than out towards the viewer, and grasps Mary's hand or breast with a lifelike gesture, he also often holds a rotulus or makes the gesture of blessing, as in an example by the Magdalen Master (New Haven, Yale University Library), which again stresses his divine role rather than his helpless humanity (fig.5).²⁵ Later in the century, however, in keeping with the teaching of the mendicant orders and the increase in lay piety, growing interest in the human qualities of Christ, Mary and the saints began to be reflected in literature and art.²⁶ In consequence the original schematic form of *Maria lactans* images gave way to more natural poses and expressions for the Child and Mother.²⁷

Popular mendicant texts, such as the *Trecento* work *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, reflect the type of detail provided by Franciscan teaching: '... the mother [Mary] stooped to pick Him up, embraced Him tenderly and guided by the Holy Spirit, placed Him in her lap and began to wash Him with her milk, her breasts filled by heaven.'²⁸ The reader is encouraged to 'watch her as she diligently and wisely and studiously takes care of Him and nurses Him, and does for him all those services that she can ...', and to imagine themselves present in order to more fully empathise with the human joys and sufferings of both Mary and Christ.²⁹ Images of *Maria lactans*,

²⁵Lasareff, 1938, 35-36; Seymour, 1970, cat. no. 1.

²⁶For information on the rise of the Mendicant orders see Lawrence, 1994 or 2001, 258-278. See also Antal, 1947, 65-98.

²⁷For a detailed analysis of all the variations of pose found in *Maria lactans* imagery from the thirteenth to the fourteenth-centuries see Shorr, 1954, 58-77.

²⁸*Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 1961 ed., 33; for further examples see Levin, 1983, 583-590. In his 1997 critical text M. Stallings-Taney attributes the *Meditations* to the Franciscan friar, Johannis de Caulibus, and gives the date as somewhere between 1346 and 1364.

²⁹*Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 1961 ed., 33.

which very succinctly communicate a loving human relationship between mother and son, became widely popular from this time. Iconic depictions of Madonna and Child of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries increasingly show far more realistic images of a woman devoted to her baby, and the nursing motif also appears in narrative scenes such as the *Nativity* and *Flight into Egypt* (figs 6-7).³⁰

Although the format of the sitting Christ Child continued to be employed during the *Trecento*, Sieneese artists began to depict him reclining in his Mother's arms with his body turned towards her (fig.8).³¹ Even where he looks out at the viewer a twisting pose is employed so that his body remains turned to his mother. This creates a far more intimate and human scene. Christ is shown grasping Mary's breast with one or both hands, sometimes sucking, sometimes not. He also holds his Mother's hand or clutches his foot or sucks his fingers instead of the breast. Occasionally he kneels or stands on the Virgin's lap. In early examples he tends to be wrapped in a cloth but appears nude later and becomes more active, kicking his legs.³² The Virgin responds with mournful emotion, her attention focused on her baby or looking out appealingly at the viewer.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti's already mentioned painting of *Maria lactans* is one of the most beautiful Sieneese examples of the basic iconic type (fig.1). In this painting Mary's entire attention is taken up by her Child, whom she holds firmly grasped to her. Christ is plump and baby-like, with soft curls, and he sucks enthusiastically while kicking up his legs and turning curiously, in complicated *contrapposto*, towards the viewer. The proximity of the figures to the front plane of the painting invites a

³⁰Shorr, 1954, 66.

³¹Shorr, 1954, 61.

³²Shorr, 1954, 60-69.



fig.6 Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna and Child, Donors and Saints*, 1333, Florence, Museo del Bigallo.



fig.7 Taddeo Gaddi, *Madonna and Child*, 1334, Berlin, Staatliche Museen.



fig.8 Follower of Simone Martini, *Madonna of Humility*, 14th century, Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich Museum.

heightened emotional response from the viewer, as does the face of the Virgin, looking down intensely at her innocent baby who is destined to be sacrificed for the sake of all mankind.

Theological Interpretations and Function of the Image.

Lorenzetti's panel of *Maria lactans* is just one of many surviving examples from Italy and particularly Tuscany dating to the *Trecento and Quattrocento*.³³ But what function did these images fulfil and why was the motif so popular during this period?

Depictions of *Maria lactans* were used in various ways in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Surviving painted panels with large dimensions (over 50cm x 75cm), and particularly triptychs and polyptychs, are likely to have been designed as altarpieces which provided a backdrop to the celebration of mass.³⁴ The large dimensions and form of at least forty-three extant works with *Maria lactans* as the central image tends to suggest that it was a common subject for altarpieces.³⁵ (See

³³As mentioned in note 2, on the Princeton Index of Christian Art 86 surviving *Maria lactans* are listed and Williamson has found 32 more, but few of these have any documentation to indicate their original function, see Williamson, 1996, 217.

³⁴Williamson discusses the example by the Magdalen master dating to c1290 which almost certainly was an altarpiece for S. Leonardo in Arcetri, see Williamson, 1996, 187 (fig.5). Two examples by Francescuccio Ghissi are also thought to have been high altarpieces, see Williamson, 1996, 216-219, for a full discussion of this. Williamson differentiates between paintings of *Maria lactans* and *Madonnas of Humility* (discussed below), Williamson, 1996, 32. However, this thesis is concerned with the nursing motif in whatever context it arises.

³⁵Williamson, 1996, 219.

figs 9-13 for examples by Puccio di Simone, Orcagna, Cenni di Francesco di ser Cenni, Agnolo Gaddi, and Bicci di Lorenzo dating to the *Trecento* and *Quattrocento*.)³⁶

This form of wide, multi-panelled altarpiece developed during the *Duecento*, probably in response to codification of the doctrine of transubstantiation at the Lateran Council of 1215 and corresponding changes in liturgy.³⁷ The incarnation and humanity of Christ was a vital element of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which stated that during communion the Eucharist literally became the flesh and blood of Christ. As the body from which Christ had sprung, the Virgin's flesh was intimately connected with His and she was therefore also closely associated with Eucharistic ritual. Indeed in some instances the Virgin is envisaged, both in literary and artistic images, as a table or oven, offering up the body of Christ as food for the faithful.³⁸

Mary represented a provider of food and in this respect a breastfeeding image, where Mary is, in a sense, fuelling the Eucharistic body, would be considered an appropriate backdrop to the mass. This connection between the Eucharist and the Virgin's breast was given explicit expression in the vision of Beata Gherardesca di Pisa (c1200-d.1269) who, during mass, saw heaven where a host of angels '... broke

³⁶Fremantle, 1975, 90, 144, 269, 384, 479. Puccio di Simone's polyptych in the Accademia in Florence is a *Madonna of Humility* (in other words the Madonna in seated on a low cushion) and was probably an altarpiece in San Onofrio delle Cappucine in Florence, see van Os, 1990, 2, 76. Agnolo Gaddi's altarpiece also depicts the *Madonna of Humility*. In the other three examples mentioned the Virgin is enthroned.

³⁷van Os, 1988, 1, 13; Gardner, 1994, 5-19.

³⁸While it was initially believed that the Virgin was only the vessel through which Christ passed, as the emphasis on the humanity of Christ grew in Christian doctrine, and as a result Mary's role as his Mother, the concept that she gave of her flesh and blood to create his human body also grew. This correlated with gynaecological belief that a mother gave flesh to a foetus while the male seed gave spirit, see Bynum, 1991, 100-114, 205-222 and Williamson, 1996, 190-197.



fig.9 Puccio di Simone, *Madonna of Humility with Ss. Lawrence, Humphrey, James and Bartholomew*, first half of 14th century, Florence, Accademia.



fig.10 Orcagna, *Maria lactans*, 1350, Utrecht, Aartsbisschoppelijk Museum.

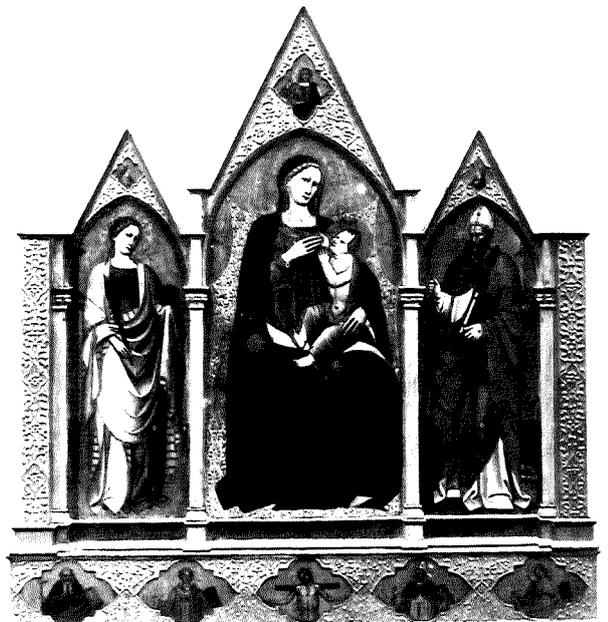


fig.11 Cenni di Francesco di ser Cenni, *Maria lactans*, 1400, Montalbino, S Giusto.



fig.12 Agnolo Gaddi, *Madonna of Humility*, second half of 14th century, Perugia, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.



fig.13 Bicci di Lorenzo, *Maria lactans with Ss. Hippolytus, John the Baptist, James and Christopher*, 1435, Bibbiena (Casentino), Propositura, Pieve di S. Ippolito.

the bread of the Eucharist, which they were sacrificing, upon the breast of the Blessed Virgin ...'³⁹ Although this was a miraculous vision, in instances where images of *Maria lactans* were used as the backdrop to the holding up of the host during mass the congregation would have simultaneously looked at the bread of the Eucharist and the lactating breast of the Virgin.⁴⁰

Mary's ability both to create and sustain the Eucharistic flesh ensured that she constituted a very powerful figure, one who was necessary for the salvation of mankind. A study of the nursing motif by Beth Williamson argues that the most important message carried by the *lactans* motif, up until the early fifteenth century at least, was the Virgin's power.⁴¹ According to Williamson, the power that Mary expresses in her ability to bear and nourish Christ primarily symbolises her role in his incarnation and her power of intercession with Christ on behalf of the salvation of mankind.

Indeed, Mary's power was an important element of the message conveyed by images of Mary suckling Christ. By breastfeeding Christ, Mary expresses their relationship as human mother and son. She sacrificed her body to sustain him and he owes her in return the due respect of a son to a mother and must, therefore, listen to her requests for mercy made in aid of human souls. This was a concept which was given explicit artistic expression in the very early *Quattrocento* in an anonymous painting which was originally in Florence Cathedral, (New York, Cloisters fig.14).⁴² Here Mary, dressed in white, the colour of her milk, indicates her breast and points to

³⁹*Vita di Gherardesca*, AASS, 29th May, 7:3, 166; cited in Williamson, 1996, 199.

⁴⁰Williamson, 1996, 186-197; 216-220.

⁴¹Williamson, 1996, 89, 143, *passim*. See also Levin, 1983, 551-559.

⁴²Possibly the earliest Italian example of the combination of Christ and Mary in intercessory roles, see Zeri, 1971, 56-59. See also Offner, 2000, 4, 8, 352.

a group of supplicants (probably a family and presumably the patrons of the work) as she looks towards Christ. The words which flow across the image from her to him read 'Dear son, because of the milk I gave you have mercy on them', the implication being that he cannot refuse his mother who breastfed him.⁴³ Christ meanwhile, draped in red, the colour of his blood (and wine), looks towards God the Father above, and indicates his wound and his mother's breast. His inscription reads 'My Father, let those be saved for whom you wished me to suffer the passion'.⁴⁴ (See fig.15 for a later example of the double intercession.)

The belief that Christ himself interceded with God on man's behalf relates to St. John's concept of Christ as 'advocate'.⁴⁵ This power was extended to Mary, in her role as *Madonna Mediatrix*, quite early in Christianity and by the later Middle Ages was well established and often associated with the symbol of her lactating breast, presumably because of the historical power of that symbol.⁴⁶ The anonymous author of the *Trecento* text *The Mirror of Man's Salvation* elaborates: 'Let us hear how Christ shows his wounds to God the Father for our sins ... how could such a merciful Father resist the prayers of such a son when he sees the wounds endured at his

⁴³ 'Dolcissimo Figliuolo Pellac:/ Te Chio Tidie. Abbi Mia (Misericordia) di Chostoro'.

⁴⁴ 'Padre Mio Sieno Salvi Chostoro Pequali Tu/ Volesti Chio Patissi Passione'. See Zeri, 1971, 58, for further examples of the double intercession motif. See also Bynum, 1991, 106. Williamson discusses Mary's intercessory role in detail and gives instances of further examples of the double intercession motif - there is one, for example, in the Palazzo Comunale, Chieti, see Williamson, 1996, 260-283 and her 2000 article in *Apollo*.

⁴⁵ 1 John 2:1-2, '... we have an advocate with the Father Jesus Christ ... And he is the propitiation for our sin: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.'

⁴⁶ Williamson, 1996, 261-262. Indeed, the concept of Mary as mediator and intercessor on behalf of Eve dates back to Irenaeus of Lyons (c140-c202 AD), see Levin, 1983, 562-571.

command', further stating that on her Assumption into heaven, Mary stood before Christ, 'showing her son her breasts that had suckled him'.⁴⁷

But this power expressed through breastfeeding was not confined to Mary alone. In fact, in societies where breastmilk is absolutely depended upon for the survival of babies, the breast of any mother can be used as an imperative in pleas for mercy, intercession or just getting a child to do its duty. One example found in the *Golden Legend* in the 'Life of St. Sebastian' tells how the wives and mothers of Christian converts Mark and Marcellianus visited Sebastian and urged him to dissuade their husbands and sons from converting to Christianity and becoming martyrs. During this interview the women exposed their breasts, a compelling and complex gesture designed to convey to Sebastian the urgency of their plea (fig.16).⁴⁸ This pleading gesture has a pre-Christian history; in Homer's *Illiad* Hecuba bears her breast when she is begging her son Hector not to fight Achilles.⁴⁹ In Athenaeus' *The Deipnosophists* the case is told of Phryne, a fourth-century BC courtesan, put on trial

⁴⁷*Speculum humanae salvationis*, 1907, XXXIX, 80. This is a print of a surviving manuscript in Munich (clm.146) which the editors believed came from Alsace. In fact it probably originated in Bologna, see Silber 1980, 33-51. The text from the Munich manuscript quoted above was illuminated with depictions of Mary and Christ before God, she showing her breast and he his wounds, the two scenes are kept separate, however. This is also the case in the illuminations of another manuscript of the text now in Paris, Bible. Nat., fr. 6275. See also *Speculum humanae salvationis, Being a Reproduction of an Italian Manuscript of the Fourteenth-Century*, Oxford, 1926. The developed conception of the double intercession probably originated in a work by Ernardus of Chartres of the twelfth-century, *Libellus de laudibus B. Mariae Virginis*, PL, 189, 1726. Max Seidel has also pointed out that in the carved relief scenes of the Last Judgement on the Pistoia and Pisa Duomo pulpits, Giovanni Pisano depicted figures representing Mary and/or Charity, with either a hand on the breast or a breast revealed as a sign of their appeal to Christ for mercy, see Seidel, 1977, 70-76.

⁴⁸Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 98. For a painted image see Kaftal, 1986, *Central and South Italian Painting*, 999.

⁴⁹Homer, *The Iliad*, 1950 ed., 399.

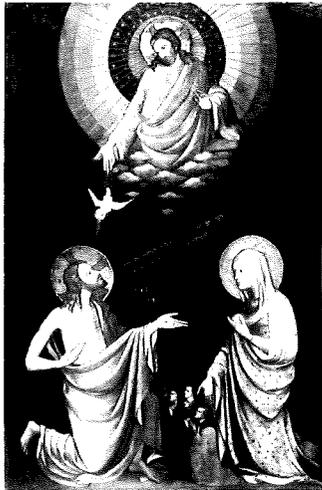


fig.14 Florentine School, *Double Intercession*, early 15th century, New York, Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



fig.15 Monte di Giovanni, *Intercession of Christ and the Virgin with Saint Bernard*, end of 15th century, Montreal, Museum of Fine Arts.



fig.16 Anon., *Life of S. Sebastian: the Family of Mark and Marcellianus plead with Sebastian*, late 15th century, Barletta, S. Sepolcro.

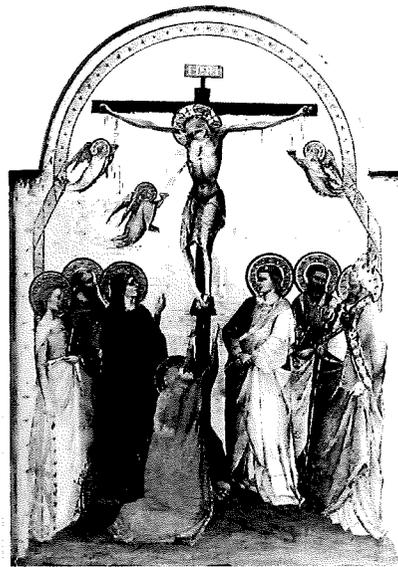


fig.17 Giovanni Bonsi, *Crucifixion*, 1360s, Avignon, Musée du Petit Palais.



fig.18 Giovanni Bellini, *The Blood of the Redeemer*, late 15th century, London, National Gallery.



fig.19 Quirizio of Murano, *Christ gives Eucharist to Supplicant*, c1460, Venice, Accademia.

for blasphemy and almost condemned to die.⁵⁰ Her defender, Hypereides, as a last-ditch measure advises her to uncover her breasts, whereupon the judges relieve her. The breasts of women, because they sustain babies who will otherwise die and because all mothers sacrifice their flesh for the sake of their children, are extremely powerful signifiers generally. Mary's power of intercession with Christ did not set her apart from other women so much as place her within an age-old female tradition.

Christ is therefore placed within this female tradition when he uses his side-wound, the site of his sacrifice, as an imperative in his plea to God the Father for mercy for mankind, just as Mary uses her breast, thereby drawing strong parallels between Christ's wound and Mary's breast. This paralleling of Christ and Mary in the 'double intercession' images of the Middle Ages is even more developed in some theological writing where Christ is referred to as a mother because of his role as protector and nourisher of humans.⁵¹ In a letter to one of his protégés, for instance, St. Bernard directed 'Suck not the wounds but the breasts of the Crucified [Christ]. He will become mother to you, and you will be son to him.'⁵² *Trecento* and *Quattrocento* depictions of angels collecting Christ's blood in a chalice, and thereby preserving Eucharistic nourishment for mankind, as in Giovanni Bonsi's 1360s panel of the *Crucifixion* (Avignon, Musée du Petit Palais) and Giovanni Bellini's late

⁵⁰Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, 1959 ed., VI, 185-187.

⁵¹Bynum, 1982, *passim*.

⁵²'...suge non tam vulnera quam ubera Crucifixi. Ipse erit tibi in matrem, et tu eris ei in filium.' S. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 1977, VIII, *Epistolae*, 322. See the Introduction for OT references to God with breasts. St. Clement stated that '... to little ones who seek the Word the craved-for milk is given from the Father's breasts of love for man', *Christ the Educator*, 1954, 43. See also the *Odes of Solomon* written in the second-century where Mary describes the Virgin birth; 'a cup of milk was offered me ... the cup is the Son, and he who is milked is the Father and the Holy Spirit milked him, because his breasts were full.', *Odes of Solomon*, 1973, ode 19, 82.

fifteenth-century panel *The Blood of the Redeemer* (London, National Gallery), similarly implies parallels between breast and wound, milk and blood (figs 17-18).⁵³ Particularly evocative is a painting by Quirizio of Murano, (c.1460, Venice, Accademia) which depicts Christ surrounded by phrases from the *Song of Songs*, squeezing blood from a wound, the position of which corresponds more to the position of a breast than the traditional site of the wound in Christ's side (fig.19).⁵⁴

In as far as the bare breast was associated with nourishment, Mary's body was equated with food, while Christ's body was also spiritually equated with food because of the theological implications of the Last Supper and the Eucharist.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Christ's body was paralleled with Mary's because she gave flesh to Christ, nourished him and saw him die on the Cross for the good of mankind, while he lived, suffered and died for the same reason. Like Christ, Mary gave of her blood:

'Only the blessed Virgin Mary has done more for God, or just as much, as God has done for all humankind ... God fashioned us from the soil but Mary formed him from her pure blood ... God nourished us with the fruits of paradise, but she nourished him with her most holy milk ...'⁵⁶

Around 1368 the Blessed Paula of Florence experienced a vision in which she received some of the Virgin's milk as a sign of her mercy and intercession, a reward

⁵³Offner, 2000, 4, 8, 64-67 for the Bonsi image and Robertson, 1968, pl.XVII for the Bellini image.

⁵⁴Bynum, 1991, 108-114. The ancient belief that breastmilk was transmuted blood continued to prevail throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, giving further reason to draw parallels between the milk of Mary and the blood of Christ.

⁵⁵For this argument in more detail see Bynum, 1987, 271.

⁵⁶Cited in Graef, 1963, 1, 316-317.

for long hours gazing in contemplation at an image of Mary nursing Christ.⁵⁷ Legends like this and that of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who had also famously reported receiving a gift of Mary's milk in the twelfth century, inspired further variations on the basic *Maria lactans* type.⁵⁸ Mary is depicted offering her breast, and therefore her intercessionary aid, to various men, from apostles to saints to groups of supplicants. A painting by Filippino Lippi (Florence, Badia) and another by an artist of the Emilian school (Faenza, Pinacoteca) both depict Bernard receiving the sacred gift from Mary while an illumination in the Milan-Turin Book of Hours (Turin, Museo Civico) and a fresco in Santa Maria, Rivalta Scriva illustrate similar scenes (figs 20-23).⁵⁹ Such images symbolise Mary's merciful and beneficent nature through the action of her giving milk: 'to all she has opened the bosom of her compassion'.⁶⁰

Indeed, presumably due to the vital significance of breastfeeding within the culture of late mediaeval Italy and Europe generally, milk and nursing are common motifs in popular legends, religious literature and pious devotion. Several holy men, in the wake of St. Bernard, had visions of feeding at the Virgin's breast, while holy women experienced trances in which they imagined suckling Christ, and some

⁵⁷Meiss, 1964, 152, n.36.

⁵⁸*Sancti Bernardi vita prima*, PL, 185: 225-68. St Bernard used breast imagery frequently in his sermons and other writings, which were disseminated across Europe in the following centuries and used for the purposes of personal reading and preaching; for information on St. Bernard's life, work and influence see the collection of essays edited by Pennington, 1977, and in particular that of Leclercq, 1-26. Bernard fostered a particular devotion to Mary and famously developed an exegesis on the *Song of Songs*, a book of the Old Testament rich in breast imagery, aligning the central protagonists, the bride and bridegroom, with the figures of Mary/Ecclesia and Christ. In one instance he describes the Church and Christ embracing and kissing - '... so great is the potency of that Holy kiss that no sooner has the bride received it than she conceives and her breasts rounded with the fruitfulness of conception ...', see S. Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Work of Bernard of Clairvaux*, 1971, 2:9, V, 7, 58.

⁵⁹See Dal Prà, 1990, 48-71; Dupeux, 1993, 152-166; Barnay, 1999, 34-35, 83.

⁶⁰Cited in Miegge, 1955, 138.



fig.20 Filippino Lippi, *S. Bernard's Vision of Mary*, 1480s, Florence, Badia.



fig.21 Emilian School, *S. Bernard's Vision of Mary*, 15th century, Faenza, Pinacoteca.



fig.22 Anon, *Mary gives Milk to a Suppliant*, 1380-85, Turin-Milan Book of Hours, Turin, Museo Civico.



fig.23 Anon, *S. Bernard's Vision of Mary*, 15th century, Rivalta Scriva, Santa Maria.



fig.24 *A Very Sick Cleric Cured by Our Lady*, Miniature from *Miracles de Notre Dame* de Gautier de Coigny, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms.fr.22928, fv.80.

dripped holy fluid from their breasts.⁶¹ Angela of Foligno reported a vision of Christ who offered her his wound to kiss or suck.⁶² The *Vita* of the Franciscan Tertiary Alda of Siena (d.1309) records that she was given a drop of Christ's blood to taste and she subsequently commissioned a painting of Mary putting her mouth to Christ's wound in honour of this vision.⁶³ Although no such painting survives, the very fact that a painting featuring the reversal of the *Maria lactans* motif could have existed, and was certainly envisaged in the mind of one biographer, illustrates the interchangeability of Mary and Christ, her breast and his wound.

St. Catherine of Siena is reported to have miraculously restored the milk of nursing mothers on two occasions and also used the nursing motif frequently in her teachings and writings.⁶⁴ In her *Dialogues with God*, recorded by her assistants, Christ says to her:

‘... My ministers, who stand and feed at the breasts of Holy Church ... not only should they feed themselves, but it is also their duty to feed and to hold

⁶¹For instance nursing was a leitmotiv in the writings of the fourteenth-century Dominican friar Henry de Suso. He characterises God and Jesus as mother figures, harking back once more to Jewish imagery in the Old Testament (especially the *Song of Songs*) and uses milk as a metaphor for nourishment of the soul. Vincent of Beauvais in the thirteenth century, and Alanus de Rupe in the fifteenth, both reported stories either about themselves receiving some of the Virgin's milk in a vision or about clerics cured of disease by nursing from her, see Barnay, 1999, 34-35 and Bynum, 1987, 103, 270, n.56. Bynum extensively discusses all the relevant examples. See fig.24 and Pigler, 1956, 1, 506-507, for a list of paintings concerning this theme.

⁶²Angela da Foligno, *L'Autobiografia e gli scritti della beata Angela da Foligno*, 1932, 140-142; cited in Bynum, 1987, 142.

⁶³*Vita de B. Alda seu Aldobrandesca de Siena*, AASS, April 26th, 3, 2:21, 474; cited in Bynum, 1987, 142.

⁶⁴Bynum, 1987, 170.

to those breasts the universal body of Christian people ... See then with what ignorance and darkness, and ingratitude, are administered, and with what filthy hands are handled this glorious milk and blood of My spouse ...⁶⁵

Just as the Christian fathers had done one thousand years before, Catherine used breast milk as a metaphor for divine wisdom and nourishment. Such literary imagery was given visual emphasis in the images where Mary donates her milk to supplicants.

Caroline Walker Bynum has carried out extensive investigation into the significance of food in the practice of devotion in the late Middle Ages. She claims convincingly that for mystic women, such as St. Catherine, food motifs were deeply important because of the importance of food-provision in women's lives.⁶⁶ Women prepared food in the home for the males who had control over their lives. Holy women, however, rejected the control of their husbands and fathers and instead of providing food in the home, or even for themselves, they went about town providing food for the poor and needy and occasionally performing miracles which often included the miraculous production of fluid from their bodies.

Lactation on the birth of a baby is at the root of the association between the bodies of women and food production and is highly ramified as it implies sexual activity, something which, as far as possible, was avoided by holy women of the late

⁶⁵St. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue of the Seraphic Virgin Catherine of Siena*, 1896 ed., XIV, 49.

⁶⁶See in particular Bynum, 1987, 273. Many mystic women did not excrete in the normal way but secreted milk or other holy fluids, and this was an expression of their power; Agnes of Montepulciano, Margaret of Città di Castello, Rose of Viterbo and Mary Magdalena de'Pazzi are all reported as having secreted miraculous effluvia and nursing imagery was important in many of their stories.

Middle Ages. The Virgin's breast, however, was intimately connected with food, not merely of a physical nature but also of a spiritual nature. It was believed that the Virgin's milk, like her body, was totally pure and incorruptible; this was the explanation for the longevity of the relics of her milk.⁶⁷ The purity of the Virgin's milk was thus linked to her chastity; and correspondingly many female saints who had remained virgins, like St. Catherine of Alexandria, were reputed to exude milk instead of blood on their death.⁶⁸ The example of Mary, who, as the imagery of *Maria lactans* illustrated, did produce milk despite her state of Virginité, contributed to the popularity of the concept of miraculous lactation as an expression of the deep religiosity of these women's lives.

Clearly, during the late mediaeval and early renaissance period there existed a strong symbiotic relationship between art and religious thought. It has been suggested that artistic images of Charity and Ecclesia, found in various locations in Tuscany visited by St. Catherine, may have contributed to her literary imagery concerning breastfeeding.⁶⁹ But, given the elision of these figures with *Maria lactans*, images of the latter, far more common, are just as likely to have inspired Catherine. Devotional art was the object of long and intense contemplation for many, and several devout people were reputed to have had mystical visions during such meditations.

⁶⁷Warner, 1976, 199.

⁶⁸Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 334-341.

⁶⁹Meiss, 1964, 116.

Domestic Functions and Personal Interpretations of the Image.

The image of *Maria lactans* held complex theological meanings and implications during the late Middle Ages. Both men and women could appeal to the Virgin for salvation and hope to receive the milk of her kindness. She was also a model, to be imitated by the holy women living within society. But sophisticated doctrinal messages were likely to have been understood only in the most superficial sense by many, while other aspects of meaning had more primary importance. Because the image constitutes a domestic and everyday occurrence, and one uniquely associated with the lives of women, it would also have been particularly pertinent, on a less elevated level, to ordinary women, and this tends to be ignored by those who focus on theological meanings of the image.

While altarpieces depicting *Maria lactans* had a communal and public function, many of the surviving painted panels of the image are small-scale devotional works, which would have been kept by individuals or families for private contemplation (figs 25-27).⁷⁰ Although such privately-owned images would have served as objects of religious devotion, with all the implied theological connotations discussed above, they would also have had more mundane functions. The belief in the efficacy of displaying such panels in the home is evident from a famous late *Trecento* passage:

‘Have pictures of saintly children or young virgins in the home, in which your child, still in swaddling clothes, may take delight ... It is well to have the Virgin Mary with the Child in her arms, with a little bird or apple in His

⁷⁰Williamson, 1996, 216-219; Fremantle, 1975, 93, 412, 436.



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fig.25 Puccio di Simone, *Madonna of Humility*, mid-fourteenth century, Musée de Dijon.



fig.26 Lorenzo di Bicci, *Maria lactans*, 14th-15th century, whereabouts unknown.



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fig.27 Alvaro Portoghese, *Maria lactans*, early 15th century, Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum.

hand. There should be a good representation of Jesus nursing, sleeping in his Mother's lap ... I should like them to see Agnes with her fat little lamb, Cecilia crowned with roses, Elizabeth with her roses on her cloak, Catherine and her wheel with other such representations as may give them, with their milk, love of virginity'.⁷¹

These domestic images were considered useful in the upbringing of children, providing moral guidance. But although this was part of their official function, there may have been additional benefits from displaying scenes of strong familial relationships, as exemplified by *Maria lactans*, within the home. Images of the Virgin nursing Christ, and thereby displaying her love both for him and mankind, could have helped to create domestic harmony and a loving atmosphere. They may also have provided aids to form bonds with the children perhaps absent from the home with a wetnurse or to give comfort after the death of a child, an all too common occurrence.⁷² Mary also lost her son and the belief that the souls of departed children were gathered into the arms of such a loving and merciful Mother would doubtless have been a consolation.

Examples of *Maria lactans* are also found in manuscript illumination, in particular in Books of Hours. These texts, widely popular amongst the laity, especially women, provided a series of prayers to the Virgin which were to be said throughout the day, and were illuminated with themes to be meditated upon, in particular images from Christ's Infancy or Passion.⁷³ Many were prepared for

⁷¹Giovanni Dominici, *Regola del governo di cura familiare parte quarta*, 1927 ed., 34, cited in Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, 115.

⁷²Haas, 1998, 157-176; Johnson, 2000, 215-233; Palmer, 2002, 7-14.

⁷³Wieck, 2001, 473-516.



fig.28 Book of Hours of René of Anjou, *Mary and Christ*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. lat. 1156a, f.48.



fig.29 Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves, *Crucifixion*, c1435, Pierpont Morgan Library.

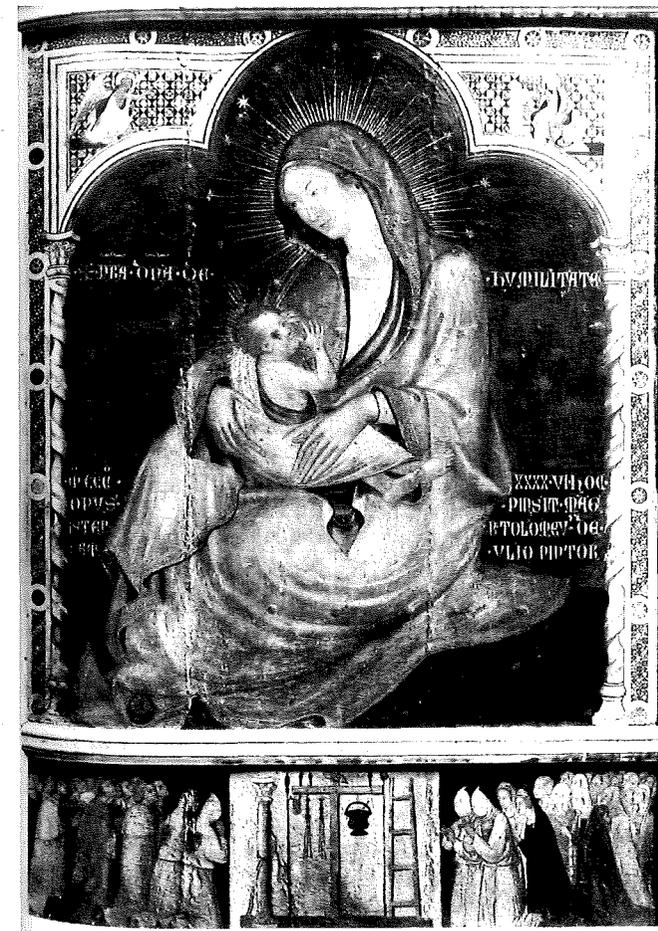


fig.30 Bartolomeo da Camogli, *Madonna of Humility*, 1346, Palermo, Museo Nazionale.

women on their marriage and the illustrations depict Mary as the paradigm of a chaste wife and a loving and merciful mother; in some cases she appears with her breasts flowing with milk (figs 28-29).⁷⁴ It would appear that these were meant to act as exemplars to women in their new role.

But did the women who owned Books of Hours and had domestic images of *Maria lactans* in their home (for the most part women from wealthier families), enthusiastically follow Mary's example and breastfeed their babies along with women of the lower classes who had no choice? Any modern interpretation of the iconography of these breastfeeding images, and any understanding of the widespread popularity of the associated motifs, needs to establish how breastfeeding was perceived within the society and how this relates to the reading of artistic images.

Breastfeeding in the Real World.

The history of childhood has been delved into extensively by historians over the last few decades.⁷⁵ In particular Florence and other areas of Italy have drawn attention because of detailed written family records dating to the era, which yield

⁷⁴Groag Bell, 1989, 147. The figures show an image of Mary feeding Christ while testing the water in his bath from the Book of Hours of René of Anjou (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. lat. 1156a, f.48), see Harthon, 1977, 88-89, and a Crucifixion scene from the Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves (Pierpont Morgan Library), which includes Mary exposing one breast at the foot of the Cross as an intercession plea to Christ on behalf of Catherine, see Plummer, 1964, 53-54, pl. 24.

⁷⁵See Ariès, 1962; Trexler, 1973-74(a), 96-116, 1973-74(b), 259-284, 1975, 225-252; de Mabuse, 1976; Herlihy, 1985; 1995; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 1985; Klapisch-Zuber, 1985; Fildes, 1988; King, 1991; Atkinson, 1991; Parsons and Wheeler, 1996; Haas, 1998 and Musacchio, 1999 to name but a few particularly relevant here. For a comprehensive list see the bibliography of Haas, 1998.

much information, as do the many Italian mediaeval and renaissance handbooks which give advice on the family and the rearing of children.⁷⁶

The consensus of many researchers has been that childhood was an unpleasant experience in past centuries, with the late Middle Ages and Renaissance no exception.⁷⁷ One of the main reasons for this conclusion is the fact that the practice of wetnursing appears to have been widespread during the period. It is clear, from repeated references in the *ricordanze* (family journals) of Florentine families, that from the *Trecento* through to the *Cinquecento* the custom of placing new-born babies with hired wetnurses became increasingly common, at first amongst the wealthiest circles of society but spreading down through the classes.⁷⁸

Many have concluded that the increasing popularity of wetnursing signifies a distancing of parent from child, and was a result of the high child mortality which numbed parental emotion and led to a lack of interest in, and even neglect, of

⁷⁶The results of research on the family records, known as *ricordanze*, of Florence can be found, in particular, in Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, 132-164. Important contemporary household manuals include L. B. Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence: I libri della famiglia*, 1969 ed.; Francesco Barbaro, 'On Wifely Duties: *De re uxoria*', 1978 ed., 179-230; Francesco Barberino, *Del reggimento e de' costumi delle donne*, 1842 ed.; Paolo da Certaldo, *Libro di buoni costumi*, 1945 ed.; Giovanni Dominici, *Regola del governo di cura familiare*, 1927 ed. A general commentary on family life can also be found in San Bernardino, *Le prediche volgari*, 1934, 1948.

⁷⁷See in particular Ross, 1976; Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, and the various articles by Trexler, 1973-74(a); 1973-74(b); 1975.

⁷⁸See for instance, Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, *Ricordi*, 1969 ed. and Cristofano Guidini, *Ricordi 1362-1396*, 1843 ed., 25-47, which has a separate section recording 'all of my children who were sent to the wetnurse, the salary I gave, when, to whom, and where.' References to details concerning the wetnursing of children are found in numerous Florentine journals dating from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, an extensive list of relevant manuscripts and published sources can be found in the bibliography of Haas, 1998.

children. It has also been postulated that the wetnursing experience, and the regular moving around from one nurse to another as the parents saw fit, must have caused trauma which lasted throughout life in the form of separation anxiety and that one of the long-term results of this was the idealisation of the Mother and Child relationship.⁷⁹

Recently, however, Louis Haas (among others) has thrown doubt generally on the negative view of childhood experiences of the past.⁸⁰ The issue of childrearing is inevitably one which is fraught with emotion and it is difficult to set aside the premise that only in the modern world do we treat children as they should be treated. But Haas argues that children of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance were not as neglected and unloved as previously thought and he cites many sources which appear to support his theory. Although he accepts the fact that wetnursing was widespread he suggests that it was not necessarily traumatic, being an accepted social custom comparable to our day-care system today.⁸¹

There were good reasons why parents of the *Trecento* and *Quattrocento* thought that wetnursing was a healthier option for a baby; early milk, colostrum, was considered not to have reached its full potential, and babies were believed to have better chances of survival if they had early access to plentiful mature (although not too mature) milk.⁸² Country air too was considered to be healthier for the upbringing

⁷⁹Ross, 1976, 185, 199; Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, 144-145; Haas, 1998, 120.

⁸⁰Haas, 1998, 1-15.

⁸¹In fact, there are few actual recorded criticisms of wetnurses in the primary sources, but there is evidence of long surviving attachment to them, wetnurses were often left valuable gifts in wills, for instance, Hughes, 1975, 115-143; Haas, 1998, 7, 94.

⁸²Francesco de Barberino, *Del reggimento e de' costumi delle donne*, 1957 ed., 189-191; Haas, 1998, 96. Because breastmilk production works on a supply and demand basis, the milk supply will never become plentiful and will quickly dry up in

of children and this also partially explains why urban families increasingly sent their babies out to rural wetnurses.⁸³ Perhaps the most important factor of all in the choice of wetnursing, however, was the desire to evade the contraceptive effect of lactation, thereby enabling a wife to become pregnant again more quickly, a consequence of the high infant mortality and the need to produce living heirs to strengthen family dynasties.⁸⁴

However there is also evidence that some disapproved of the practice of wetnursing in the Middle Ages, or at least thought it was less beneficial for a baby than maternal nursing. St. Bernard himself recommended nursing by the mother as his mother had done.⁸⁵ According to the *Golden Legend*, Bernard's mother '... did not allow her babies to be nursed by other women: it was as though she wished with her

a mother whose baby has been given to another woman to suckle and so the idea that babies need mature milk from the start would lead to extended periods of wetnursing.⁸³ Haas, 1998, 103.

⁸⁴See Harrel, 1981, 796-823 for discussion of the contraceptive effects of lactation. Evidence that people were aware of this at the time comes from Alberti who stated in his work on family life that '... these doctors nowadays will assert that giving the breast ... makes [the mother] sterile for a time', cited in Haas, 1998, 96; see also 17-36 for a detailed discussion on the reasons Florentines wanted to have many children. Also see Musacchio, 1999, for analysis of art and artefacts commissioned to celebrate the birth of babies in early renaissance Florence, which demonstrate the importance of the birth of children to Florentines. It was believed that becoming pregnant again during the nursing period of one baby tainted the milk and would lead to poor health in the nurseling, which resulted in a taboo on sex during the breastfeeding period, Haas, 1998, 98, n.53. It is difficult to establish the extent of such a taboo, however. The main evidence of the disinclination to feed babies milk of a pregnant woman is the fact that wetnurses were required by contract to inform their employer if they were pregnant, whereupon the child would be either weaned or moved to another wetnurse, see Fildes, 1988, 57. Churchmen certainly advised against conjugal relations during the lactation period, although they were not necessarily heeded in this advice, see Cherubino da Siena, *Regole della vita matrimoniale*, 1888 ed., 63.

⁸⁵See Shahar, 1982-83, 281-209, 284; Bell, 1985, 29-34.

milk, somewhat to infuse them with her own goodness.⁸⁶ Similarly, St. Catherine was also, according to her biographer, fed by her own mother although she was the only child in her family to so benefit.⁸⁷ The conclusion that could be drawn here is that especially good people were fed by their own mothers. This reflects a belief that the character of a baby was formed by the milk that nourished him, and in part explains why animal milk was not thought to be a healthy alternative to breast milk.⁸⁸ The danger to character should the wrong wetnurse be chosen was one very pertinent reason why moralists condemned wetnursing.

The positive accent put on maternal breastfeeding in religious texts such as the *Golden Legend*, taken in conjunction with the rapid increase in popularity of the *Maria lactans* motif in the *Trecento*, might suggest that the image of Mary nursing Christ was being used as an example of good womanly behaviour in the face of the expanding custom of wetnursing. Fears about the degeneration of virtue in women should they be 'liberated' from any of the duties of motherhood, and left with time on their hands, may have been responsible for the promotion of maternal breastfeeding which came from men of the church. In the *Quattrocento* this fear was made explicit by San Bernardino of Siena who suspected that the desire to resume sexual relations fuelled a woman's decision not to feed her own baby. In a public sermon in Siena, Bernardino claimed that children were put out to wetnurse so that a woman could

⁸⁶Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 98.

⁸⁷*Caterina de Siena, Legenda Maior*, AASS, 30th April, 1, 2:6.

⁸⁸This belief dates far back in history: Romulus and Remus were believed to have inherited the militaristic strengths which enabled them to become the founders of the Roman Empire from the wolf which suckled them. Despite this, however, it was generally felt to be undesirable to have a child inherit animal qualities. In fact, in a time of poor hygiene and no refrigeration, animal milk would often have been unsafe to feed an infant and the weaning period, which came around the age of two, was the most dangerous time for many babies, Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, 154; Haas, 1998, 128-131.

‘procure [her]self more pleasure ...’, although he did concede lawful reasons for hiring a wetnurse, such as the poor health of the mother and inadequate milk.⁸⁹

Some fears about the dangers of wetnursing also appear to be reflected in *Trecento* texts giving advice on the rearing of children. The authors of these manuals generally started out with recommendations that mothers should feed their own babies if possible, and then go on to give extensive advice about choosing a wetnurse. These texts are now well-known and widely quoted in the abundant modern literature on the history of childhood. But it is actually very hard to draw any real conclusions from them because the authors were highly influenced by ancient medical writers such as Soranus of Ephesus (96-138 AD), who was the source for most material on child-rearing written in the mediaeval period.⁹⁰ In many ways, *Trecento* writers were simply echoing Soranus’ advice in their manuals on childrearing, both in their recommendations that mothers’ milk is best and in their advice on wetnursing, and so these texts are not necessarily indicative of the current beliefs about and customs surrounding the feeding of babies.

Because of the difficulty in interpreting many primary sources the prevalence of wetnursing in the fourteenth century has recently been called into question by Beth

⁸⁹San Bernardino of Siena, *Prediche volgari*, 1934, 1948, II, 159-60; translation from San Bernardino, *Sermons*, 1920, 89-90. See also Origo, 1962, 60-61.

⁹⁰See Williamson, 1996, 151. Soranus was ambivalent to breastfeeding. Just like his followers over a thousand years later, he recommended that the best person to feed a baby was the mother but that a wetnurse was a good alternative if the mother was not up to it: ‘Other things being equal, it is better to feed the child with maternal milk; for this is more suited to it and the mothers become more sympathetic towards the offspring ... But if anything prevents it ... [lest] the mother grow prematurely old having spent herself through the daily suckling ... the mother will fare better with a view of her own recovery and further childbearing, if she is relieved of having her breasts distended too.’ Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1956 ed., 90.

Williamson, as has any suggestion that there was a negative attitude to breastfeeding in the early fourteenth century.⁹¹ Many of the primary sources do, however, contain evidence that wetnursing was increasingly acceptable in Italy from at least the late fourteenth century, despite the inherent dangers emphasised by moralists and writers of manuals. Besides many family records which give details of contracts with wetnurses, Francesco Datini states categorically in a letter to Cristofano di Bartolo dating to the 1390s that ‘Even in Florence and Prato there are few men who keep a child at the breast in the house.’⁹² Literary references to wetnursing also seem to indicate that it was widely acceptable as early as the mid-fourteenth century. One of the stories of the *Decameron*, which dates to the 1350s, mentions a wetnurse who stayed with and protected her charges through long years of traumatic separation from their natural mother.⁹³ Another tells of one young mother who only began to recover from the ordeal of giving birth after her baby had been given to a wet-nurse.⁹⁴

But does an increasing unwillingness to breastfeed amongst wealthy women indicate an increasing distaste for, even disgust of, breastfeeding? Feelings about breastfeeding in late mediaeval and renaissance Italy do appear to have been rather ambivalent. There is some evidence which suggests that one of the reasons for

⁹¹Williamson, 1996, 143-169.

⁹²See Origo, 1960, 127. Datini and his wife, Margherita, who could not have children herself, worked as agents, locating and vetting suitable wetnurses for their friends in the Florentine area. Many of their letters which concern the conduct of this business survive and are further evidence of the widespread custom of wetnursing. Francesco was a wealthy businessman and the very fact that he took a major role as wetnurse agent tends to indicate that demand was high, indeed their correspondence illustrates the difficulties they had keeping up with demand, Margherita complains in one letter that all good wetnurses ‘seem to have vanished from the world.’, cited in Origo, 1960, 200-201.

⁹³Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1972 ed. 2:6.

⁹⁴Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1972 ed. 5:7.

choosing a wetnurse was a feeling of delicacy about breastfeeding on the part of wealthier mothers and that it was a matter of social status. Giovanni Ruccellai, in his *Il Zibaldone Quaresimale*, and other authors, give poor health as one reason for mothers not to feed but also allow that the act itself might have offended mothers.⁹⁵ This might have been fuelled by the pressures of social status: Paolo Bagellardo advises that ‘... if the infant is of the poorer class, let it be fed on its mother’s milk.’⁹⁶

Indeed there were reasons to view the act of breastfeeding with distaste. As noted above, breastmilk was understood to be transmuted blood, namely, the blood which nourished babies before birth, redirected from the womb to the breasts. In other words it was menstrual blood in an altered form, a female bodily substance which was understood to be polluted. Women who were menstruating were to be avoided and were not allowed into church.⁹⁷ Correspondingly breastfeeding was illegal in some sacred places.⁹⁸

Contemporary songs attributed to wetnurses, on the other hand, show no sign of shame or humiliation in connection with their chosen vocation, only a positive description of what they do for their charges and pride in their abilities:

‘Here we come *balie* from Casentino, each one looking for a baby ... he [the baby] will be so well fed, that we’ll soon have him standing straight ... We’re fine in our way of life, prompt and skilful in our trade ... With lots of good

⁹⁵See Ross, 1976, 186 and Haas, 1998, 97.

⁹⁶Cited in King, 1991, 13.

⁹⁷Again see Cherubino da Siena, *Regole della vita matrimoniale*, 1888 ed., 62-63.

⁹⁸Waley, 1988, 109, see also Randolph, 1997, 18-19.

fine milk our breasts are full ... We're young married women, well experienced in our art ...'⁹⁹

Choosing not to breastfeed and hiring a wetnurse appears to have been a status symbol and a signifier of class. If you were a mother of the upper-classes then you could choose not to breastfeed, if you were a member of the lower classes there was nothing to be ashamed of in feeding your own, or indeed someone else's, baby. The wetnursing trend spread down the social scale during the late *Trecento* and *Quattrocento* because many had aspirations to be upwardly mobile. So why was it acceptable to see the Queen of Heaven depicted in art as a member of the lower classes, breastfeeding her own baby during this period?

Humility

During the course of the *Trecento* the *lactans* motif was regularly included in images entitled *Madonna of Humility* which illustrated the exemplary nature of the Virgin and emphasised the most desirable characteristics of the female sex (figs 8, 9, 12, 25).¹⁰⁰ The original composition of images of *Maria lactans*, as it developed in the late *Duecento* and early *Trecento*, depicted the Madonna standing or seated on a throne. In a *Madonna of Humility* the Virgin appears seated on a cushion on the ground or on a low bench, often, but not always, suckling her baby. Narrative images such as Daddi's 1330s *Nativity* in the Bigallo in Florence probably influenced the development of the new composition for the iconic images (figs

⁹⁹*Scrittori d'Italia: Canti carnascialeschi*, 1936, no. XXIX, *Canzona delle Balie*, 39, cited in Ross, 190, 1976, 192-194.

¹⁰⁰Meiss, 1964, 132-156. See also van Os, 1990, 12, 75-85, who suggests that many *Madonnas of Humility* had a funerary function, highlighting the links between incarnation and rebirth indicated by the *lactans* motif. See also King, 1935, 474-491 and Blaya Estrada, 1995, 163-171.

6-7).¹⁰¹ A narrative scene, where events are portrayed as they were actually supposed to have happened, resulted in Nativity scenes where the Madonna is seated on the ground nursing, just like the very lowest ordinary women. Thus the primary import of *the Madonna of Humility* is the stress on Mary's extreme humility, one of the cornerstone virtues of the Christian faith, in offering up her body to the will of God.¹⁰²

Simone Martini has been identified as the original creator of the *Madonna of Humility*, although the earliest dated extant example known is by Bartolomeo da Camogli in the Museo Nazionale, Palermo (fig.30).¹⁰³ In this painting, dated 1346, the Virgin is clearly sitting on the ground with her knees bent to support the reclining baby Christ. The painting has an inscription to the effect that this is the Madonna of Humility and around the Virgin's head are twelve gold stars, indicating the Woman of the Apocalypse as seen by St. John the Evangelist in his vision on Patmos.¹⁰⁴ This was to become a common feature of later *Madonnas of Humility*.

The *Madonna of Humility* is not just a modern epithet attached to certain paintings of the Madonna because they contain certain elements of iconography. Painters of the *Trecento* influenced by the composition of what are considered today

¹⁰¹Meiss, 1964, 147-148.

¹⁰²Meiss, 1964, 153.

¹⁰³See Meiss, 1964, 132-145. Beth Williamson has put forward an alternative source for the *Madonna of Humility* type in Italy in the *Trecento*: manuscripts of Hours of the Virgin from Metz which include illustrations of *Maria lactans* at the beginning of the prayer for Matins, see Williamson, 1996, *passim* but particularly 47-77. She does concede, however, that Simone may have been the artist who adopted and developed the motif and who was responsible for its introduction and widespread use as an image on painted panels in Italy.

¹⁰⁴Revelation 12. See Bergamini, 1985, for the aligning of Mary and the Woman of the Apocalypse.

to be early versions of the *Madonna of Humility*, themselves used the title. (See fig. 8 for an untitled example, possibly by a follower of Simone Martini.) What were the connotations attached to an image given this title? Millard Meiss argues that the *lactans* motif was included in *Madonnas of Humility* because it emphasised Mary's humility in allowing the saviour of mankind to issue from her body and had moral qualities, benevolence and mercifulness, attached to it.¹⁰⁵ But while Meiss points out that it also signified the Virgin's power as mother of God, Marina Warner interprets the 'humility' epithet as implying that the Virgin was envisioned carrying out an action which was associated with only the poorest women of the time and it would therefore have been viewed as a humiliating experience for Mary the Queen of Heaven.¹⁰⁶

Williamson refutes this and asserts that as, in her belief, wetnursing was not prevalent in the first half of the fourteenth century, when the title of *Madonna of Humility* was first used, the term humility does not infer any value judgement of the act of breastfeeding.¹⁰⁷ This argument supports her supposition that the *Madonna of Humility* epithet refers to the episode from the Bible just after the incarnation of Christ when the Virgin herself says to Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, that she was chosen by God because of her humility.¹⁰⁸ The lactation of the Virgin also refers

¹⁰⁵Meiss, 1964, 149-154. It has also been pointed out that there is possibly a connection between the ancient idea of Mother Earth (often represented by a nursing woman) and the Mother of God nursing Christ whilst sitting on the ground, see Levin, 1983, 617-619.

¹⁰⁶Warner, 1976, 201-202.

¹⁰⁷Williamson, 1996, 33, 262, *passim*. She further argues that for Mary, even if not for ordinary women, breastfeeding was pleasurable, and she cites the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (1961, 55): '[Mary felt] a great and unknown sweetness in nursing this Child, such as could never be felt by other women.' See Williamson, 1996, 145-146.

¹⁰⁸Luke 1:48.

to the incarnation of Christ and this is why it was so often included in depictions of the *Madonna of Humility*, not because it was seen as a humbling activity.

However, other iconographic elements often incorporated into paintings of the *Madonna of Humility*, such as the Virgin's seated position on the ground, her bare feet and simple dress, do appear to emphasise the Virgin's humility physically, and while the lactation motif may have an elevated symbolism, it also simultaneously emphasises her humble nature. Mary breastfed her baby like any other woman, she did not expect to be let off the punishment of Eve just because he was the Son of God. Humility and humiliation are two different concepts, despite their close etymological root. The first implies a personal modesty and lack of vanity. The second implies a sense of mortification inflicted on an individual by exterior forces. Mary's humility ensured that she accepted her role as designed for her by the Almighty and in so doing set herself up for humiliation and sorrow. Only her humility and her love of mankind enabled her to withstand such suffering.

Humility was a virtue desired of all women, not just those of the lower classes and in effect it did not matter if women viewed breastfeeding negatively or not. But the concept of wetnursing was known of, talked about and even chosen by some parents in the early fourteenth century; the trend did not suddenly spring from nowhere in the latter part of the century. And if attitudes to breastfeeding were not clear-cut, reaction to and readings of an image of breastfeeding could not have been clear-cut either. If some individuals believed that breastfeeding should only be done by low class women and that it would be humiliating for a wealthy woman to breastfeed, this must have affected the way they read images of *Maria lactans*, whatever the theological meaning signified by the image. However, the paradox of humiliation coupled with supreme power is at the heart of the Christian faith. For

early Christians the power of the crucifixion was emphasised by the very fact that their Messiah died the most degrading criminal's death and St. Paul in particular was at pains to explain this.¹⁰⁹ Mary expresses her extreme humility in breastfeeding Christ precisely because she is doing something which could be perceived as humiliating by others. Thus the breastfeeding of Christ, even if it was perceived by some as a degrading action for the Virgin, was simultaneously a signal of her extreme sanctity, and could have been intended and understood as a straightforward exemplum of humility, whatever an individual's feelings about breastfeeding were.

Yet it might still appear odd that images of *Maria lactans* continued to be so popular amongst the laity at a time when wetnurses were increasingly employed to breastfeed their babies. Paintings of *Maria lactans* bought by lay patrons and used in the home would have been commissioned by the very men who conducted the contracts with wetnurses so that their wives need not breastfeed their children.¹¹⁰ Indeed, in such a strongly patriarchal society, where women had little autonomy and were legally and to some extent personally considered possessions of the male head of the household, the popularity of wetnursing may be partly explained by the fact that husbands found it difficult to share the bodies of their wives with their children for extended periods.¹¹¹ In any case, it is clear from the *ricordanze* that, rather than disapproving of wetnursing, husbands were usually responsible for obtaining and paying wetnurses.

¹⁰⁹Paul I Corinthians, 1:18-23. See Merbeck, 1999, 16-17. These issues will be examined more fully in Chapter Three.

¹¹⁰Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, 143.

¹¹¹King, 1991, 14.

In fact, in the everyday world the identity of the woman who actually performed the physical act of breastfeeding a baby was in some way irrelevant, if the best possible wetnurse was employed then she was the mother's symbolic replica. This is implied by the recommendations that wetnurses should be '... as much like the mother as possible ...' (in some recorded cases, the wetnurse even had the same name as the mother).¹¹² Although it was accepted that wetnurses could form long-term relationships with their charges, these were considered secondary to the child's relationship with his or her natural mother.¹¹³ Mothers were in charge of the upbringing of children between the ages of around two (when they were weaned) and seven (when they were passed on to the father for further education) and were therefore responsible for early education and the foundations of religious belief: spiritual nourishment, in some ways superior to simple physical nourishment.¹¹⁴

Even although children were probably weaned before they were taught to read, breastfeeding was used as an artistic symbol for this type of mental and spiritual nourishment. In an illumination found in the *Panegyric of Bruzio Visconti* (Chantilly, Musée Condé) a woman is depicted holding a whip and offering a breast while teaching the child on her lap ABC (fig.31). The breast represents the mother's love and approbation while the breastmilk can be seen to represent the wisdom she is attempting to pass on to her child. This is a metaphorical signifier irrespective of whether or not the woman had actually breastfed her baby and the breast is indicative of the duties of motherhood generally, not just in respect of early nourishment.¹¹⁵

¹¹²Francesco de Barberino, *Del reggimento e de' costumi delle donne*, 1842 ed., 191-192; Haas, 1998, 104, n.95.

¹¹³Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1972 ed., 2:6.

¹¹⁴Haas, 1998, 136-143.

¹¹⁵Indeed, in other artistic instances the breast was used as a symbol for learning and the passing on of wisdom, as in personifications of Grammar who was viewed as the

In any case, most mothers did feed for a short period before the baby was handed over to a wetnurse and some bonding and loving relationship could be established even during a very short period of nursing, however much wetnursing was deemed best for the child and the mother. The image of *Maria lactans*, with her loving, beneficent and humble nature, could thus have represented a general exemplum of motherhood and even womanhood, turned to by women in times of difficulty and considered appropriate by lay patrons even if they fully intended to employ wetnurses.

In her 1986 article, 'The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture', Margaret Miles suggests that the popularity of images of Mary nursing Christ during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance reveals an attempt by predominantly male patrons to control contemporary women by providing an image of a fantasised ideal mother.¹¹⁶ She also postulates that although the persona of *Maria lactans* was used as an exemplar, in contemporary literary texts women were discouraged from identifying themselves with the Virgin in case they went too far and also identified with her power as symbolised by the *lactans* motif.¹¹⁷ Evidence for this argument is taken from literary texts such as the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* which states that Mary felt 'a great and unknown sweetness in nursing this Child, such as could never be felt by other women...', thereby appearing to emphasise her unattainable virtue.¹¹⁸

first teacher on entering school and a fostermother, see Seidel, 1977, 49-52, fig.32.

¹¹⁶Miles, 1986, 193-208.

¹¹⁷Miles, 1986, 207-208.

¹¹⁸*Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 1961 ed., 55.



fig.31 Bartolomeo da Bologna di Bartoli, *Panegyric of Bruzio Visconti*, 14th century, Chantilly, Musée Condé.



fig.32 Giovanni Pisano, *Grammar*, 1302-1310, Pisa, Duomo Pulpit.



fig.33 Bicci di Lorenzo, *Maria lactans*, 1427, Florence, street tabernacle.



fig.34 Andrea Bonaiuti, *Maria lactans*, 14th century, Florence, street tabernacle.

As has been discussed above, however, the sacred power of women to reproduce and nourish children, symbolised through representations of the breast and breastfeeding throughout history, was acknowledged in texts such as the *Golden Legend* during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance.¹¹⁹ The emotional responses of women to works of art would not necessarily have been affected by the theologians who insisted that Mary was ‘alone of all her sex’, especially as this singling out was balanced in other instances by writers such as Giovanni Dominici who followed St. Jerome’s recommendation that girls should take their ‘pattern by Mary’, and the fact that the rooms of young girls were decorated with images of Mary would have encouraged this.¹²⁰ Contemporary teaching that Mary was aware of Christ’s destiny and the sacrifice he was to make and she was to suffer for the sake of mankind, even from the beginning of his life, would have explained the uniqueness of Mary’s experience and in addition given an image of the breastfeeding of Christ an understandable poignancy, easily empathised with, particularly in a time when the lives of new-borns were extremely precarious.¹²¹ Whatever the barriers imposed by the singling-out of Mary and whether or not a mother had breastfed her own children, it is more than possible that this emotional strand of identification could continue.

That women and particularly mothers turned to the persona of *Maria lactans* for example and help on a personal and everyday level is confirmed by the limited but clear evidence that many depictions of *Maria lactans* were cult images.¹²² The increased lay devotion during the *Duecento* and *Trecento* led to the increased popularity of the cults of the saints, with the Cult of the Virgin as the most

¹¹⁹See notes 48-50. See also the quotation from a letter by St. Catherine of Siena in chapter three, note 50.

¹²⁰St. Jerome, *Selected Letters*, 1933, 355.

¹²¹See note 152.

¹²² Holmes, 1997, 191-193; Chavasse, 2000, 138-164.

popular.¹²³ These cults were usually focused on miraculous images or relics, anything from a bodily part of a saint to the Virgin's belt or a piece of the True Cross. Some of the most ubiquitous relics were small phials containing samples of the Virgin's milk which could cure all sorts of ailments, particularly the drying up of mother's milk and diseases of the breast.¹²⁴

Because there was no viable alternative to breastmilk for the nourishment of babies, a loss of milk in a mother or a wetnurse meant that already vulnerable babies were in immediate danger if no other lactating woman could be found. Because of this, miraculous images of Madonna and Child and shrines containing relics of Mary's milk were regularly visited and prayers for the sustainment or return of milk as well as for cures of diseases of the breast were addressed to the loving Mother of God. One known example of a cult image of *Maria lactans*, at the Hermitage, S. Maria di Giacobbe, Pale, is inscribed with a prayer: 'Oh, Reverend Mother, receive us and grant us your maternal benefits, guide us to the eternal hills on the wings of faith'.¹²⁵ A second, in the Marche, depicts a standing Virgin with milk pouring from

¹²³See Duby, 1996, *passim*. For information on the cults of the saints see Brown, 1981; Bell and Weinstein, 1982; Wilson, 1983; Abou-El-Haj, 1994; Snoek, 1995; Howard Johnston, 1999.

¹²⁴Plancy, 1821-1822, 2, 160-161. Milk-relics were not always sanctioned by the Church and were even publicly condemned by an influential preacher like San Bernardino of Siena, *Prediche volgari sul campo di Siena nel 1427*, 1989, 1, 809. This condemnation evidently had little effect, however, if we are to believe Calvin's disgusted outburst in the sixteenth-century 'there is no town, however small, no monastery or nunnery, however insignificant, which does not possess it [Mary's milk] ... Had the breasts of the most Holy Virgin yielded a more copious supply than is given by a cow, or had she continued to nurse during her whole lifetime, she could scarcely have furnished the quantity which is exhibited', Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church: Inventory of Relics*, 1958, 1, 317.

¹²⁵Chavasse, 2000, 148, n.24. See also Holmes, 1997, 191-193, who mentions several instances of miraculous panels of *Maria lactans* and cults of the Virgin's milk, the following for which was at its height at the end of the *Quattrocento*. Holmes

her breasts: the implication being that her succour is available to all.¹²⁶ There are also two shrines near Foligno which mothers visited to seek aid from Mary with breastfeeding problems.¹²⁷

While these examples are rural, which may suggest that poorer mothers and wetnurses were their most frequent visitors, there is also some evidence that similar activities took place in the heart of Florence. One tabernacle fresco in a shrine on the corner of via Aretino and via S. Salvi depicts a *Maria lactans* by Bicci di Lorenzo dating to 1427, which would have been the object of devotion for many (fig.33).¹²⁸ An earlier street tabernacle showing a *Maria lactans* by Andrea Bonaiuti, on the corner of via delle Ruote and via San Gallo, is very badly damaged because, it is presumed, it was a miracle-working image, subject to much veneration (fig.34).¹²⁹ Such images do indicate a feeling of reliance on and identification with the Virgin, who suffered the usual worries of a mother and the eventual loss of her son.¹³⁰

speculates that this may indicate that, in these cases, wetnurses were responsible for the popularity of the miraculous images.

¹²⁶Chavasse, 2000, n.25.

¹²⁷Chavasse, 2000, n.25.

¹²⁸Fremantle, 1975, 475.

¹²⁹Offner, 1996, 4, 7, 1, 210-211.

¹³⁰The fact that thirty-two editions of *Miracoli della Virgine Maria* were published in 1500 gives some idea of the widespread popularity of legends concerning Mary. Such collections gathered and set down in a fixed manner vernacular traditional stories which had been current in many varying forms in the oral tradition for a long time previously, see Chavasse, 2000. Popular stories emphasise the belief in Mary's, as well as Christ's, love of mankind, and her selflessness and suffering in aid of the salvation of mankind. For example the legend which aligned Jesus with the mythical Unicorn, ensnared by Mary the Virgin, whereupon he lies in her lap and suckles at her breast and thus is tamed, was a widespread allegory in the late Middle Ages, see Sheppard, 1967 and Schiller 1971, 1, 52-53. They also contain many more mundane stories where Mary is involved with helping women with the general difficulties of life - childbirth, child-death, suspected sexual infidelity and so on.

Changing Iconography in the *Quattrocento*.

In the second half of the *Quattrocento* the appearance of wetnursing, even in religious imagery, reflects the level of acceptance the custom gained during the century. Ghirlandaio's *Birth of John the Baptist* (Florence, Santa Maria Novella), which dates to 1485-90, depicts the new-born baby being fed by a wetnurse while his mother lies in bed (fig.35).¹³¹ This painting may mirror the luxurious lifestyle of its wealthy patrons but it does appear in a sacred setting and would have been subject to approval from the Dominican friars of Santa Maria Novella.

Throughout the *Quattrocento*, however, condemnations of wetnursing and exhortations to mothers to feed their own children continued to be made by churchmen and writers, and were, if anything, more strident than in the *Trecento*. Cherubino da Siena, in his manual *Regole della vita matrimoniale*, states that 'outnursing (is) a corrupt and abusive practice'.¹³² The humanist writer Francesco Barbaro is rather more tactful, in *De re uxoria*, written between 1415 and 1416, pointing out that female breasts are placed high on the body so that mothers can embrace their babies.¹³³

¹³¹Holmes, 1997, 187-191; Querman, 1998, 71-73.

¹³²Cherubino da Siena, *Regole della vita matrimoniale*, 1888, 1987 ed., 63-64.

¹³³Francesco Barbaro, *De re uxoria*, 1978 ed., 221-223. Again, writers of the fifteenth century were highly influenced by the classical tradition and had increasing numbers of antique texts to follow. Both Plutarch and Aristotle stressed the benefits of maternal feeding and this may explain the humanists' apparent preference for it, see Fildes, 1988, 15.

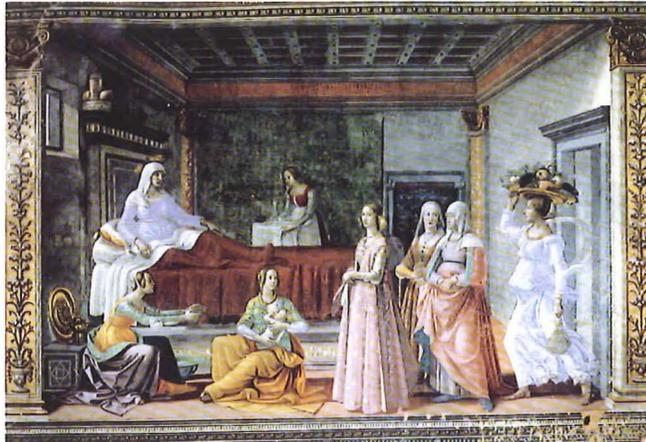


fig.35 Ghirlandaio, *The Birth of St. John the Baptist*, 1485-90, Florence, Santa Maria Novella.



fig.36 Tintoretto, *The Birth of St. John the Baptist*, London, Wellcome Institute Library.



fig.37 Andrea Pisano, *Maria lactans*, c1350, Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo.



fig.38 Follower of Donatello, *Maria lactans*, 1427, London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

But despite the apparently continuing belief of many that maternal breastfeeding was superior to wetnursing, it is significant that even the most harsh critics of wetnursing advised maternal feeding only if the mother was in good health.¹³⁴ This is a crucial point: legitimate reasons for choosing wetnursing lie behind its increasing popularity in the *Quattrocento*. If wetnursing appeared to aid a mother's recovery from childbirth then it would have had considerable appeal in a time when giving birth was frequently fatal for mothers. As the custom spread the social prejudices about breastfeeding would have grown because it increasingly became the case that it was only women from the lower echelons of society who breastfed. The economic pressures which made it desirable to have numerous children, not to mention the demands of social status, were also growing in the fifteenth century.

The appearance of Ghirlandaio's wetnursed John the Baptist on the wall of one of the most important churches in Florence is indicative of some tacit acceptance of wetnursing by the clergy. However, while there are several depictions of St. John the Baptist with a wetnurse dating to the late *Quattrocento* and the *Cinquecento* there are none of Christ with a wetnurse. This indicates that while the Church may have sanctioned the idea that Elizabeth did not feed John herself, the weight of history which affirmed that Mary did breastfeed could not be contradicted (fig.36). Despite this, the popularity of *Maria lactans* in art gradually waned during the *Quattrocento* and *Cinquecento*, and although the increasing predilection for wetnursing may have been partially responsible, it was not a straightforward case of cause and effect. Patrons did not stop commissioning paintings of Mary nursing Christ simply because they hired wetnurses for their children. Many factors were involved in the

¹³⁴Haas, 1998, 96.

diminishing production of *Maria lactans* images, not least the artistic innovations of the fifteenth century.

Around the mid-*Trecento*, what is thought to be one of the earliest sculpted example of *Maria lactans* appeared in Italy (Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, fig.37). It is now generally accepted that Andrea Pisano sculpted this figure, which appears to be based on Ambrogio Lorenzetti's panel mentioned above, around 1350.¹³⁵ The baby gazes intensely into his mother's eyes, instead of turning to the viewer, and reaches up his right hand, as if to catch her hair. The sculptural form intensifies the humanisation of Mary and Christ and ensures that Mary's breast is unmistakably the flesh of a human woman.

The appearance of *Maria lactans* in three-dimensional form anticipated the innovations of the fifteenth century when the motif was reproduced in various media. Another sculpted representation of the image, this time in the form of a bronze relief, by a follower of Donatello, dating to 1427 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum) illustrates a Virgin with a highly naturalistic breast (fig.38).¹³⁶ The child, sitting on his mother's hip, twists away from her in a much more developed pose than any seen in the *Trecento*, although he reaches up his hand to his mother in a gesture comparable with that seen in Andrea Pisano's sculpture.

Small bronze plaques of this type often had an outer frame with a handle which enabled them to be held up during mass and passed around the congregation to be kissed.¹³⁷ The new bronze-casting techniques developed by Donatello and his

¹³⁵White, 1996, 592-593; Pope Hennessy, 1996, 250.

¹³⁶Avery, 1994, 44-45; Jolly, 1998, 43-45, 144.

¹³⁷Parker McLachlan, 2001, 369-429, 420.

contemporary Ghiberti facilitated the multiplication of popular images to an unprecedented extent. Other new or rediscovered techniques developed in the early decades of the *Quattrocento* also meant that the image appeared in various media - terracotta as well as bronze and marble.

In painting, the stylistic developments of the early decades of the fifteenth century which were taken up wholesale by artists in the middle years of the *Quattrocento*, ensured that painted images of *Maria lactans* also became more convincingly human. The importance of these developments for the *Maria lactans* motif can be illustrated by a comparison of examples from early in the fifteenth century with others from the second half of the century.

Masolino's painted panel of *Maria lactans*, which dates to 1423-24, (Munich, Alte Pinakothek) depicts a Virgin with a realistic breast positioned convincingly on her body, but the background is undeveloped and flattened by the use of gold leaf and the drapery is ornamentally arranged in sweeping folds (fig.39).¹³⁸ Several angels hover on either side of the Virgin while God is shown above her head sending down the dove, symbolising the spirit of Christ which entered the Annunciate Virgin. Here Mary, although engaged in the human act of breastfeeding, still occupies an otherworldly and exalted position: the paradox of the Queen of Heaven and the humble servant of God and mankind remains.

In comparison, examples of Mary nursing Christ from later in the century and into the *Cinquecento*, such as those by Bramantino (Boston, Museum of Fine Art), Cosimo Rosselli (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art) and Cima da

¹³⁸Strehlke with Frosinini, 2002, 144-147; Joannides, 1993, 379-381.



fig.39 Masolino, *Maria lactans*, 1423-24, Munich, Alte Pinakothek.



fig.40 Bramantino, *Maria lactans*, c1485, Boston, Museum of Fine Art.

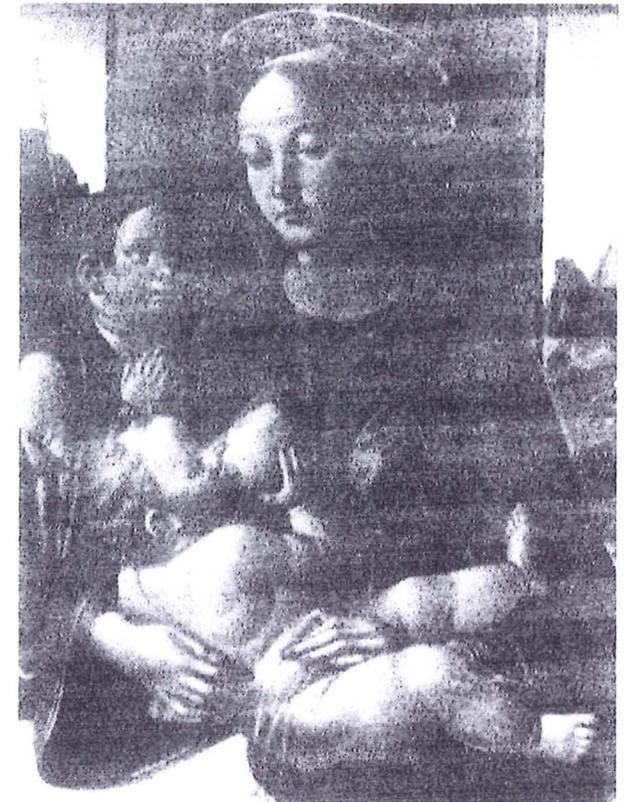


fig.41 Cosimo Rosselli, *Maria lactans*, late 15th century, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art.

Conegliano (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) demonstrate the loss of this paradox (figs 40-42). Mary is set in a realistic landscape, dressed as a contemporary woman, with no gold, ornament or even airborne angels to mark her out as exceptional. Rosselli's landscape recedes naturalistically on either side of the high-backed chair on which Mary sits. Her exposed breast is positioned accurately and is full and heavy with milk while her drapery clings to her body so that her unexposed breast is defined. She is accompanied by St. John the Baptist, shown as a child whose size is in correct proportion to the other figures in the painting as well as for the historical age he would have been in relation to Christ.

The development of perspective and realistic landscaping, accurate anatomy and contemporary dress and so on, place the breastfeeding Madonna in the real world and she becomes virtually indistinguishable from a contemporary rural wetnurse. Social prejudices about the classes from which wetnurses came were growing towards the end of the *Quattrocento* and into the *Cinquecento*.¹³⁹ Despite this, Rosselli's setting for the nursing Virgin, that is, in a landscape with logical perspective and properly proportioned attendants, was popular across Italy from the second half of the *Quattrocento* and into the *Cinquecento*. But from the middle decades of the *Quattrocento* the numbers of *Maria lactans* images produced did reduce considerably, judging from the numbers of surviving examples. This may be because the association with wetnurses was too blatant, especially in images where there is no other sign of

¹³⁹Some evidence of this can be found in Vasari's biography of Raphael, whose father '... knew how important it is to rear infants, not with milk of nurses, but with that of their own mothers ... [and] ... insisted that ... [Raphael] should be suckled by his own mother, and that in his tender years he should have his character formed in the house of his parents, rather than learn less gentle or even boorish ways and habits in the houses of peasants or common people ...', Vasari, *Le Vite* 1966 ed., 4, 156-157, translation from de Vere, 1996 ed., 1, 711. For urban contempt and fear of country peasants in the *Trecento* see Larner, 1980, 171.



fig.42 Cima da Conegliano, *Maria lactans*, c1510, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



fig.43 Ghirlandaio, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, c1490, Florence, Santa Maria Novella.



fig.44 Cosimo Rosselli, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, 1492, Florence, Salviati Chapel, Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello.

the Virgin's elevated status. It may also be because the physical realities of breastfeeding, full, heavy and very obvious breasts, when accurately reproduced in paint, began to appear inappropriate details to be included in paintings of the Virgin.¹⁴⁰

Even in examples of *Maria lactans* from the latter half of the *Quattrocento*, where signifiers of Mary's status are included, the nursing motif appears rather out of place. The realistic depiction of breastfeeding is awkward in conjunction with the depiction of Mary in a majestic and glorified state.¹⁴¹ For illustration of this see, for instance, one example by Ghirlandaio (Florence, Santa Maria Novella), where the nursing Madonna is hovering in the air in a mandorla supported by angels, as in scenes of her Assumption, and another, by Cosimo Rosselli (Florence, Salviati Chapel, Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello) where she sits on an ornamental throne (figs 43-44).

Was the reason images of the breastfeeding Madonna lost currency from the second half of the *Quattrocento* simply because Mary's exposed breast had become too real? Or was there a deeper more fundamental change in attitudes to the breast and breastfeeding? Did the range of meaning signified by the female breast become extended, causing ambiguity in response to images of the Virgin's uncovered breast?

The appearance of female breasts in secular art, such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, does reflect a new sexualised view of the breast in the *Quattrocento* which eventually would subsume the religious connotations associated with the breast and

¹⁴⁰Holmes, 1997, 167-195.

¹⁴¹Holmes, 1997, 178-183.

breastfeeding. But the breast has always held some sexual meaning - the pose of the *Venus Pudica*, which Botticelli adopted in his *Birth of Venus*, was one which dated back to the Classical period. The gesture of the female, covering both her pubic area and her breasts, indicates that these are the areas of her body she wishes to hide for modesty's sake, and relates both regions to her sexuality. This pose was well known throughout the Middle Ages: Giovanni Pisano used it, for instance, in his sculpture of *Prudence* on the Pisa Duomo pulpit at the beginning of the *Trecento*. Why then, was it considered appropriate to show the Virgin's breast in fourteenth-century paintings of *Maria lactans*? To what extent could Mary's uncovered breast have been interpreted as sexual in fourteenth-century depictions of *Maria lactans*?

Returning once more to Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 1330s panel of *Maria lactans* in the Palazzo Arcivescovile in Siena, one notes that although the artist has apparently striven to convey natural, life-like poses with his renderings of Mother and Child, Mary's drapery completely masks most of her anatomy, including her second breast, while her exposed breast is not entirely recognisable because very little of it is actually uncovered and it is positioned rather strangely. This is true, to a greater or lesser extent, of all contemporary depictions of *Maria lactans*, a fact which has drawn comment from modern writers.¹⁴² Does the apparent abstraction of the one exposed breast and the complete lack of the second indicate that artists of the *Trecento* were

¹⁴²Miles, 1986, 193-208, 204. Miles describes the breasts of Mary in *Trecento* depictions of *Maria lactans* as appendages, not real parts of her anatomy, and in her explanation of this she refers to Anne Hollander's argument which asserts that nudity always implies a sexual message in religious as well as secular art, Hollander, 1993, 178. Hollander claims that nudity is used to gain the attention of the viewer and to intensify the experience of looking at the image but must be carefully balanced with factors which deter inappropriate sexual response, thus Mary's lack of dishevelled clothing and her abstract-seeming breast. See also Yalom, 1997, 40, 42.

attempting to guard against any overtly erotic response to their depictions of a partially nude Mary?¹⁴³

If one focuses only on images of *Maria lactans* this argument may appear valid, but a wider survey of *Trecento* painting indicates that whether partially nude or fully clothed, the anatomy revealed below the clothing of any painted figure is undeveloped.¹⁴⁴ Although some advances were being made in the *Trecento* - and Ambrogio Lorenzetti was in the vanguard - anatomical accuracy as well as perspective and spatial reality were not developed compared with works of the early *Quattrocento*. This was not necessarily due to a lack of skill but does to some extent indicate the artists' main priorities. Strict anatomical accuracy was not essential when the important element of the painting was the relationship between the Mother and Child and the empathy it could elicit in the viewer. Besides which, sculptural examples of *Maria lactans* began to appear in the mid-*Trecento*, not to mention the public sculptures of personifications of Charity and associated figures which depicted breastfeeding throughout the fourteenth century (to be discussed in Chapter Two), and in these the breasts of the mother were not abstracted, had tangible volume and were unmistakable.

The Virgin Mary was supposed to be beautiful, because, of course, of her stainless purity and innocence and this had to be depicted in artistic images of her. Theologians were well aware that she could, therefore, be looked upon with inappropriate sexual intent and strove to protect her from such responses by stressing her state of perpetual virginity and all-conquering sacredness as the Mother of Christ,

¹⁴³Miles, 1986, 204.

¹⁴⁴Smart, 1978, 1.

thereby distancing her from eroticism. This was supported by the doctrine of the Church and is made explicit in the text of the *Golden Legend*: ‘despite Mary’s exceeding beauty no man could ever desire her, for the reason that the power of her chastity penetrated all who looked upon her, and all lustful desires were quenched in them’.¹⁴⁵

Although such propaganda could not ensure that images of the Virgin were always safe from unlicensed sexual responses, the exposure of her breast was unlikely to have made any difference to whether an individual viewer did or did not respond to an image of her in a sexual way. Images of *Maria lactans* were no more likely to evoke an erotic response than any depiction of Mary because of the primary connotation of the lactating breast during the late Middle Ages: the provision of life-sustaining nurture.¹⁴⁶ A strict delineation between the maternal and sexual breast

¹⁴⁵Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 149. Although Mary was the ultimate heroine of chivalric love poetry the emphasis is always on unconsummated love, see Miegge, 1955, 107. This is not to suggest that it was not accepted that artistic images could invoke a sexual response during the Middle Ages (it was known in classical times that they could) or that images of Mary could never invoke a sexual response. But the exposure of her lactating breast would not have triggered or enhanced such a response.

¹⁴⁶Richard Trexler has examined the issue of sexual stimulation and art and asserts that the custom of covering of Jesus’ genitalia, continually followed by mediaeval and renaissance artists, in direct contradiction to the Bible, reveals a desire to circumvent any possible sexual stimulation (in males as well as females) caused by the sight of Jesus’ penis in contemporary audiences and he cites various primary sources in support of this, Trexler, 1993, 107-119. It is clear that there was some confusion and contradiction in relation to nakedness and sexuality in Christian thinking from its earliest days. Jesus should be naked on the cross, for it is only through his nakedness that the full extent of his humiliation and torture, by which he saved mankind, is made clear, but should this be reproduced in art so that anyone can view, ridicule or even sexually enjoy Christ’s *in extremis* state? However, Trexler’s main source dates from the end of the Renaissance, the Counter Reformation period, and this is extremely relevant. Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano wrote his text in 1563 and even when arguing for the covering-up of holy people in art, pointed out that Mary was never shown naked. As he cannot have been unaware of the *Maria lactans* motif by the end

implies that the very idea of a lactating breast would have been enough to de-sex it.¹⁴⁷ This is confirmed in contemporary poetry which describes the sexually attractive breast as being generally very small and firm, a far cry from the heavy, swollen breasts of a lactating mother.¹⁴⁸ The Virgin's breast in depictions of *Maria lactans* was therefore unlikely to have evoked a sexual response, not because it was abstracted or did not look like a sexual breast, but because a lactating breast was not a sexual breast.

Indeed, because the period that a woman's breasts did hold sexual significance in the Middle Ages was limited to the few short years between puberty and marriage, after which she could expect to either be breastfeeding or pregnant for the majority of the time before menopause, when she would have lost all sexual significance anyway, it could be said that the primary connotation of the breast was nutritional as opposed to sexual.

Attitudes towards the female breast are likely to have undergone a fundamental change, however, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when wetnursing presented itself as a relatively safe alternative to breastfeeding for many

of the sixteenth-century, it is fairly obvious that he, who was so concerned that Jesus' genitalia should never be revealed for fear of 'scandal', did not consider the uncovering of the Virgin's breast dangerous or shameful, see Trexler, 1993, 116 and Gilio, *Degli errori de' pittori circa l'istorie* 1965 ed., 78-79. Trexler cites Augustine as the Christian father on whose authority the nakedness of Holy people should not be shown in art, but fails to mention that for early Christians, although nakedness could always carry shame, in some respects it could also denote truth and innocence, having nothing to hide, as with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and this idea justified the depictions of naked saints during torture in some mediaeval art, see below Chapter Three and see Panofsky, 1972 ed., 154-160.

¹⁴⁷See Jacquart, 1988, 144.

¹⁴⁸For poetry and its relation to art during the Renaissance see Cropper, 1976 and 1986; Rogers, 1986 and 1988. See also Kroegel, 2003, 60-61.



fig.45 Botticelli, *Maria lactans*, 1484, Berlin, Staatliche Museen.



fig.46 Botticelli, *Maria lactans*, 1493, Milan, Ambrosiana.

mothers so that the provision of nutrition was no longer necessarily its primary function. The increased number of uncovered female breasts with primarily sexual significance found in *Quattrocento* art may well reflect this change.¹⁴⁹

The expansion of popular secularised artistic subject matter, which occurred from the second half of the *Quattrocento*, inevitably had an effect on religious images such as the *Maria lactans*. Botticelli, for instance, evidently used the same models for his Madonnas as he did for mythical figures, in particular Venus, and perhaps as a result of this, his depictions of the Virgin are subtly different from earlier examples (figs 45-46).¹⁵⁰ Indeed, it could be said that they have an edge of sexuality not found in earlier *Maria lactans*. Botticelli's nursing Virgins are very young and attractive and are not really very maternal. Hair artfully escapes from their loose veils and they make almost flirtatious hand movements, teasingly touching their breasts. A contemporary viewer of these *Maria lactans* who was conversant with Botticelli's paintings would have been reminded, by facial similarities if nothing else, of the naked female figure

¹⁴⁹In the middle of the *Quattrocento* Alberti advised artists 'If suitable, let some [painted figures] be naked and let others stand around who are halfway between the two, part clothed and part naked. But let us always observe decency and modesty. The obscene parts of the body and all those that are not very pleasing to look at should be covered with clothing or leaves or the hand', see Alberti 'On Painting' *On Painting and On Sculpture*, 1972 ed., II, 25, 40. Thus clearly the nudity of some parts of the body was considered desirable but not the sexual organs. The female breast was regularly depicted in late *Quattrocento* works of art and so was evidently not considered obscene. They were, however, a necessary part of the overall aesthetic beauty of the female form, the appreciation of which became increasingly erotic from Alberti's time. See Camille, 1998, 139-154, who examines the birth of pornography in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and considers the erasure of images in manuscripts.

¹⁵⁰Lightbown, 1989, 180-187, 218-221. See also Kroegel, 2003, 55-67, which discusses Botticelli's application of the *descriptio puellae*, the ideal description of female beauty from Petrarch, to his pagan women and to Mary. This description, which as a whole eroticised women, in its most daring form inevitably included small, firm and definitely non-maternal breasts.

emerging from the sea in the *Birth of Venus*. Because of her extreme goodness the Virgin was supposed to be beautiful but always modestly maternal, with attention entirely focused on her Child, or addressing a sad look to the viewer. Botticelli's Madonnas, however, appear rather distant.

In an image where the Virgin's motherhood is underplayed and her attractiveness emphasised to the point where it becomes almost openly erotic, the uncovering of her breast has very different implications. With the demarcation line between the maternal and the sexual breached, the Virgin is no longer protected from the natural proclivities of her audience. It was to images such as these that Savonarola took great exception at the end of the *Quattrocento*. He objected to the Virgin being represented in the form of young Florentine girls, dressed-up and made-up, and he urged citizens to burn such works.¹⁵¹

Michelangelo's unfinished *Maria lactans*, known as the *Manchester Madonna*, (London, National Gallery) dates to c1495 (fig.47). In this case, although the breast is exposed, the Child is apparently not interested, instead he is intent on the book which Mary holds. In this painting, despite Michelangelo's anatomical accuracy, there is a loss of naturalism and a stress on the aesthetic appearance of Mary and her uncovered breast. As with Botticelli, Mary's breast is rather non-maternal and is not a device to stress the humanity of Mary and Christ.¹⁵² Even if not for the purpose of

¹⁵¹Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Amos e Zaccaria*, 1971 ed., 1, 127, 391. See also Kroegel, 2003, 67.

¹⁵²In two other works Michelangelo included the nursing motif: the *Madonna of the Stairs* (Florence, Casa Buonarroti) and the *Medici Madonna* (Florence, Medici Chapel, figs 48-49). I. Levin has suggested that these sculptures demonstrate Michelangelo's development of the concepts of St. Bernard in his exegesis on the *Song of Songs*. In both Michelangelo's sculptures the Child appears to be sleeping after nursing. This was a common motif in paintings of the early Renaissance, where



fig.47 Michelangelo, *Manchester Madonna*, c1495, London, National Gallery.



fig.48 Michelangelo, *Madonna of the Stairs*, late 15th century, Florence, Casa Buonarroti.



fig.49 Michelangelo, *Medici Madonna*, c1521, Florence, Medici Chapel.

straightforward sexual delectation, Mary's breast is included in this painting to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the image.

By the early years of the *Cinquecento*, the changing breastfeeding customs in conjunction with developing artistic techniques and functions of art had resulted in partial sexualisation and reinterpretation of the traditional meanings of the *Maria lactans* motif. During the sixteenth century the simple message of the Christian motif of breastfeeding became further compromised when it became explicitly linked in art with various secular and pagan figures.

The breastfeeding motif is, for instance, found in Tintoretto's *Origin of the Milky Way*, (London, National Gallery) painted for the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II around 1580 (fig.50).¹⁵³ The painting depicts Jupiter placing his illegitimate son, Hercules, at the breast of his wife, Juno, whose breastmilk will give him immortality. She is wakened by this, however, and pulls away allowing her milk to spurt upwards, thereby creating the stars, and downwards to create the earth. The story is from a classical text, although the direct source appears to have been the Byzantine botanical textbook, *Geoponia*, which had been recently published in Venice. In his choice of subject matter Tintoretto was obviously referring to Rudolf's knowledge of the

the child lies in Mary's lap sleeping as if already dead. The uncovered breast in Michelangelo's sculptures could possibly imply that Christ received the knowledge of his destiny via the milk of the Virgin, Levin, 2001, 48-83. See also de Tolnay, 1943-60, 1, 127. The book which the Virgin holds in the *Manchester Madonna* is a direct reference to her divine knowledge. These highly complex theological meanings and the stress on the aesthetic ensure that the image of human Mary recedes beneath a weight of intellectualisation.

¹⁵³Nichols, 1999, 135-136.

classical world and his interest in astrology and botany.¹⁵⁴ But he was also providing a highly erotic image to be appreciated in more ways than just the intellectual.¹⁵⁵

There was no breach of decorum here, as the female figure depicted was a pagan Goddess and there were no strictures on depicting her naked in art. But, despite its altered form, the inclusion of the *lactans* motif, which was generally connected with the Virgin, complicated interpretations of the religious form of the motif. Tintoretto's Juno has a distinctly sexually significant body but she is also lactating: breastfeeding no longer reserved a primarily virtuous connotation in art.¹⁵⁶

Bronzino's painting of around 1545, the *Allegory of Love* (London, National Gallery), also serves to cast some confusion over the implied meaning of breast imagery in the sixteenth-century (fig.51).¹⁵⁷ Like Mary, Venus was the goddess associated with love, although in a carnal as well as a sacred sense. In Bronzino's painting she is depicted with her son Cupid, in an analogy of Virgin and Child imagery, but here the accent is emphatically on sexuality. Cupid French-kisses his mother and tweaks her nipple between his fingers, in an erotic, unbaby-like manner;

¹⁵⁴Nichols, 1999, 135-136

¹⁵⁵There was originally a second nude along the bottom of this painting, symbolising earth, which was painted out at some stage of the execution. Had it been included, the painting would have combined two views of the naked female form to be enjoyed.

¹⁵⁶Although the sinful Eve had been represented breastfeeding in art of the previous centuries and also depicted naked, the two motifs were not combined. Her nakedness generally suggested her blissful state of innocence before the fall, or her status as the bearer of sexual sin to mankind (and, Williamson argues, her necessary part in bringing Christ to save mankind). In contrast breastfeeding represented her punishment and her shame in her naked body was part of this, correspondingly in images of her nursing she was clothed. For naked Eve contrasted to *Maria lactans*, see Miles, 1992, 139-141 and for further connections between Eve and Mary see Williamson, 1996, 284-310.

¹⁵⁷Brock, 2002, 214-230.

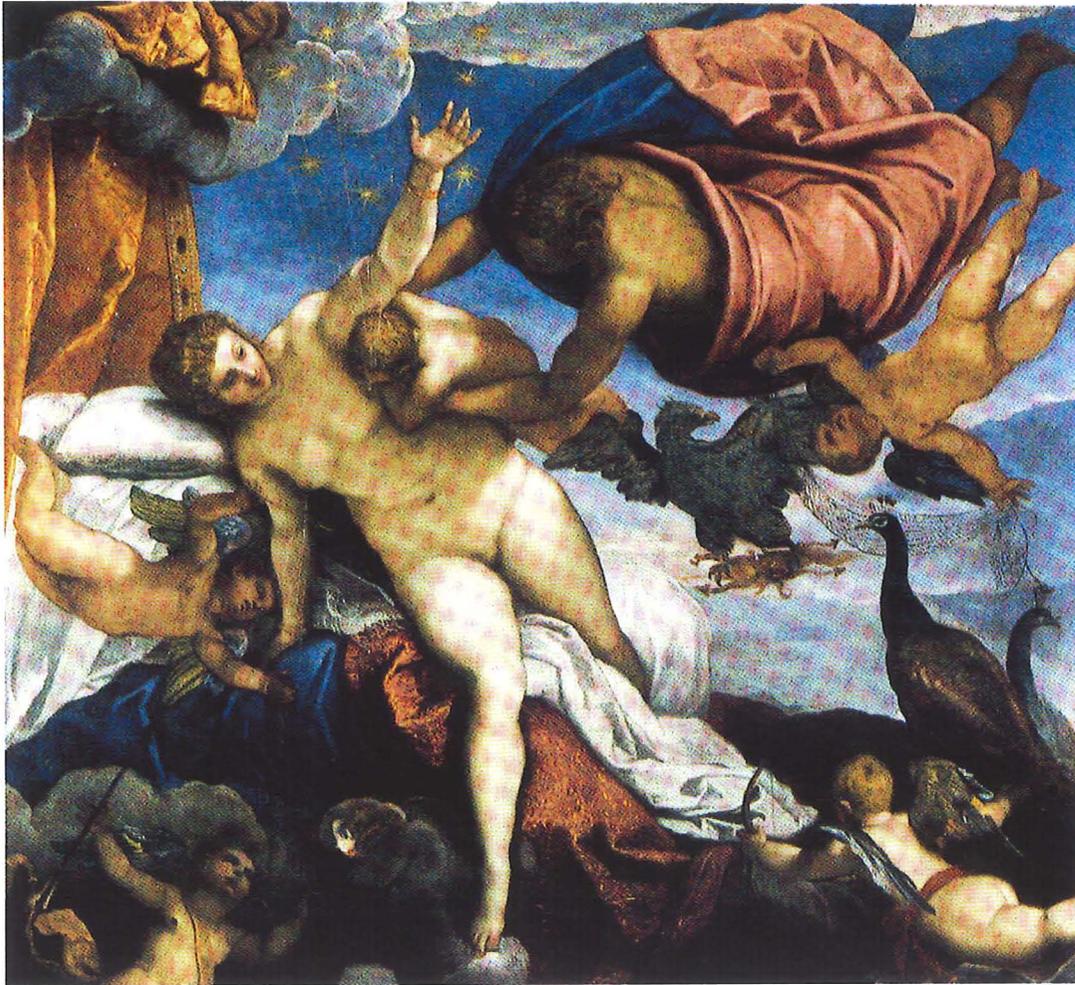


fig.50 Tintoretto, *Origin of the Milky Way*, c1580, London, National Gallery.



fig.51 Bronzino, *Allegory of Love*, c1545, London, National Gallery.

this child is big enough to be almost adolescent. This incestuous embrace, although designed to transmit a warning about the transience of time and earthly pleasures, also indirectly throws an ambiguous light on *Maria lactans* imagery. In her role as Ecclesia and Bride of Christ, theologically Mary and her son symbolically shared an incestuous relationship, which was of course understood as chaste. Such an allegory as Bronzino's, however, brings the issue of sexuality into close contact with the sacred iconography of Mary and Christ.¹⁵⁸

Vasari records that in the 1550s Daniele da Volterra was employed by Pope Paul IV to repaint Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel 'on account of the nudes' which Daniele subsequently clothed 'with light garments'.¹⁵⁹ At the Council of Trent, in the following decade, unnecessary nudity in religious art was proscribed.¹⁶⁰ Around this time Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano was writing his *Degli errori de' pittori circa l'istorie*, in which he criticised artists who portrayed sacred figures nude.¹⁶¹ Although Gilio conceded that the Virgin was never portrayed nude and therefore could not have considered the uncovering of her breast as nudity,

¹⁵⁸See also one anthropological/psychological interpretation of the widespread popularity of Mary in the Middle Ages which suggests that male devotion to Mary helped to dissipate sexual tension caused by suppressed sexual desire for a mother figure, see Carroll, 1986. Because the hidden sexual and incestual feelings were taboo the object of devotion had to be virginal. Perhaps because sexuality in art had become more acceptable by the second half of the *Quattrocento*, what had previously been well-hidden sexual meaning in images of *Maria lactans* began to surface. In the *Cinquecento* paintings of mythological women began to answer the sexual needs of the men commissioning art, and it became no longer necessary to invest Mary with these feelings and she could return to being a purely divine figure.

¹⁵⁹Vasari, *Le Vite*, 1966 ed., 5, 547, translation from de Vere, 1996 ed., 2, 595.

¹⁶⁰'No image shall be set up which is suggestive of false doctrine or which may furnish an occasion of dangerous error to the uneducated ... All lasciviousness must be avoided so that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty inciting to lust.' Session XXV of the Council of Trent, Dec. 1563, Schroder, 1978, 216-17.

¹⁶¹Gilio da Fabriano, *Degli errori de' pittori circa l'istorie*, 1965 ed., 78-79.

the general religious atmosphere, combined with the sexual ambiguity cast over the *Maria lactans* motif in secular depictions of the breast, resulted in a disinclination to portray the Virgin with bared breast. In 1570 Molanus tried to defend the *Maria lactans* motif in his *De Historia sacrorum*, but he could not turn back the tide and the motif never again regained the currency it had once had in Italy.¹⁶²

As well as having an association with sexuality breasts were also a signifier of gender or femaleness, the weaker sex, which in its worst aspect was personified in Eve, the woman who brought damnation and original sin on mankind. Part of Eve's punishment was giving birth in travail and sorrow, but the graphic details of birth could hardly be reproduced in art so she was often represented breastfeeding alongside Adam working in the fields, which was his parallel punishment.¹⁶³ The Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which asserted that Mary was born without original sin, developed and became codified during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁶⁴ The logical, eventual conclusion to be drawn from this doctrine was that if she was without sin, Mary would not have had to suffer the punishment of Eve, she would not, therefore, have had to breastfeed Christ.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception became particularly pertinent in the sixteenth-century in reaction to Protestant reformers who attacked the position of the Catholic Church on Mary, asserting that she was simply a woman with none of the

¹⁶²Molanus *De Historia sacrorum*, II, XXXI, 1570. See Meiss, 1965, 151, n.82.

¹⁶³Mary, of course, expiated the sin of Eve and brought salvation to her as well as all mankind. Her act of breastfeeding, in a state of virginity and joy, balanced and paralleled Eve's, and the two were paralleled in some *Trecento* depictions of the *Madonna of Humility*, see Williamson, 1998, 105-138 and Levin, 1983, 562-572.

¹⁶⁴Rouillard, 'Marian Feasts' *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967, 9, 211; Miegge, 1955, 107-132; Warner, 1976, 236-254; Pelikan, 1996, 189-200. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception was introduced in Rome in 1477.

powers of intercession and mediation previously attributed to her. But for Catholics Mary continued to be much more than an ordinary woman. Consequently the humanisation of Mary in art, of which *Maria lactans* had been a primary example, had to be reversed. Images of Mary nursing Christ continued to be produced in the Protestant North of Europe where breastfeeding was promoted as the duty of a good domestic wife in the pattern of Mary.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion.

Clearly, the theological concepts contained within the varying forms of the *Maria lactans* were interconnected; Mary's breast equalled humble compassion, obedience, mercy, wisdom, charity, suffering and ultimately the saving of the human soul. The image was understood on many levels, and had significance for the least educated person, which explains its popularity. Because of its identification with food, the breast can represent salvation on the most basic level but it can also represent the Eucharist, salvation on a celestial level. This range of meaning can be appreciated in a single instant, a single image available to all; even if some only appreciated some aspects of meaning on an intuitive level because they did not have the breadth of learning to put the ideas into words. Human beings depended on breastmilk for life when they were at their most vulnerable. On a more intimate level the nursing motif represented a mundane domestic activity which enabled it to fit in well in the home as an image of personal devotion for women and children particularly, even when wetnursing was becoming increasingly common. The

¹⁶⁵Yalom, 1997, 91-104.

legendary miraculous and healing qualities of the Virgin's milk also ensured that it was a common cult and shrine image.¹⁶⁶

The necessity for Mary to breastfeed Christ brought her into the sphere of ordinary women and indeed all womankind. Even the apparent supreme power which breastfeeding the Son of God gave her, the ability to intercede with her Son for the salvation of mankind, was akin to the power held by all women by virtue of their ability to produce food for babies from their own bodies. The paradox inherent in the image of breastfeeding, where Mary was at once humble, required to feed Christ like a woman of the lowest class, and yet made supremely powerful by that act, mirrored a paradox at the heart of Christian doctrine.

Breastfeeding was a symbol of good mothering and was not interpreted as a sexual signifier in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. But development of artistic style in the fifteenth century, which made Mary really look like a wetnurse of the lower classes, and the sexualisation of art in relation to the female breast, resulted in a loss of popularity for the image of *Maria lactans* in the more stringent religious world of the sixteenth century.

Mary's place as the supreme Christian female exemplum and her function as a Christianisation of aspects of older pagan goddesses provides the link between, and the ultimate reference point for, all four of the other female persona to be examined in the subsequent chapters. So flexible was the iconography of the breast that it did not remain fixed to the Virgin. The next chapter will examine how the nursing motif

¹⁶⁶Indeed the belief in the value of breastmilk was such that sick and old people were also given breastmilk to strengthen them, see Fildes, 1988, 73-74.

became associated with personifications of the theological Christian virtue, Charity, and how this iconography developed from the late Middle Ages through to the final years of the Renaissance.



fig.52 Tino di Camaino, *Charity*, c1321, Florence, Museo Bardini.

Chapter Two: Charity.

Around 1321 Tino di Camaino sculpted a large breastfeeding figure which predated Andrea Pisano's sculpted *Maria lactans* by around three decades. This figure, which is widely recognised as representing *Charity*, is distinguished from nursing Madonnas by the fact that she is suckling two small children (Florence, Museo Bardini, fig.52).¹ The original location of the sculpture is unknown but the figure is rough behind and so must have been placed against a wall and it appears designed to be viewed from below.²

¹See Lusanna and Faedo, 1986, 225-227, for the known history of this sculpture. See also Valentiner, 1935(a), 76-78 and Kreytenberg, 1997 for a history of the literature concerning it. Kreytenberg believes that originally a left foot would have been visible but is now broken off and that the figure would thus have been understood to be seated, to the right of a central point.

²In his 1935 monograph on Tino, Valentiner argued that the breastfeeding *Charity* was one of a group of the three theological virtues above the east portal of the Florentine Baptistery, pointing out that the statue was found in a garden close to Florence and would have fitted well into the Baptistery portal, see Valentiner, 1935(a), 76-78. This theory has been dismissed because of the presence of a group of what is presumed to be three theological virtues, Faith, Hope and Charity, in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence, which has also been attributed to Tino and which seems the more likely candidate for the Baptistery virtues; see Becherucci and Brunetti, 1969, 1, 229-230 for the two fragments presumed to represent *Faith* and *Hope* and the half-length figure with double cornucopia which is presumed to denote *Charity* (fig.53). Later Valentiner also concurred with the general opinion that these were the virtues sculpted by Tino for the Baptistery portal and did not suggest an alternative location for the breastfeeding figure, see Valentiner, 1954. Kreytenberg, however, has recently argued that the half-length sculpture denoted as *Charity* in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo has not been identified correctly and in fact belongs to the sculptural group which was above the north portal of the Baptistery, while the breastfeeding figure was the sculpture which completed the group of three theological virtues above the east portal of the Baptistery, Kreytenberg, 1997. Kreytenberg argues that the half-length figure was iconographically related to the Erythraean Sybil on Giovanni Pisano's Pisa Duomo pulpit, as both carry double cornucopiae (fig.54). As there is no other known instance of Charity carrying a double cornucopia, Kreytenberg concludes that the Florentine half-length also represents the Sybil and was in a group of prophets,

This sculpture has been identified as a personification of Charity because it was found near Florence and has been associated with Tino's style during the period he worked in that city, where a tradition of depicting Charity in the guise of breastfeeding mother started some time in the first half of the *Trecento*. Tino's sculpture represents an impressive early example which may well have engendered this tradition. Had it been found near Pisa, however, it could have been identified as a personification of the city of Pisa, because Giovanni Pisano used the breastfeeding motif for that purpose in Pisa, in the early *Trecento*.³ When not associated with

including John the Baptist, above the north portal of the Baptistery. He backs this argument up with some rather questionable stylistic links between the double-cornucopia-bearing figure and a head, presumed to be of St. John the Baptist also in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, which has been suggested as a fragment of the sculptural group above the north portal, see Becherucci and Brunetti, 1969, 1, 231. Against Kreytenberg's argument it must be pointed out that, although no Charity holds a double-headed cornucopia in the manner of the Florentine half-length, Giovanni Pisano's Sybil actually holds two separate cornucopiae and a child and on the Siena Duomo pulpit, Nicola Pisano's *Charity* holds one cornucopia and is accompanied by a putto holding a second smaller one (fig.55). Little can actually be established from such small variations in iconography, but the fact that the two ends of the double cornucopia held by the Florentine half-length point respectively up and down does suggest that they represent *amor Dei* and *amor proximi* which identifies it as a Charity. In addition, Vasari, from whom much of the information is gleaned regarding the sculptures decorating the exterior of the Baptistery prior to the sixteenth century, reports that Rustici replaced statues of St. John, a Pharisee and a Levite above the North portal of the Baptistery in the early *Cinquecento*, Vasari, *Le Vite*, 1966 ed., 5, 477, translation in de Vere, 2, 1996 ed., 518. The double-cornucopia-bearing half-length, therefore, does seem more likely to be the Charity which was originally above the East portal, while the location of the breastfeeding figure remains obscure.

³Indeed, early in the twentieth century it was believed that Tino's sculpture now recognised as *Charity* was executed during his period working in Pisa, around 1313-15. It was then believed to represent Pisa and was connected with Henry VII's tomb, sculpted by Tino during this period, see Valentiner, 1926-27, 203. Naturally this analysis derived from the similar iconography used by Giovanni Pisano for his sculpture of Pisa on the S. Ranieri portal, also dedicated in part to Henry VII, see Dan, 1981, 47.

Mary, always clearly defined by various iconographic symbols, the diverse associations can make it difficult to identify women presented in a context of breastfeeding.

Nearly three hundred years after the execution of Tino's figure, another monumental sculpture with a breastfeeding motif was designed by Giovanni da Bologna, executed by Pietro Francavilla and placed in a highly visible position in Pisa on the Lungarno, near the seat of Pisan government at the Palazzo Gambarcorti (now removed to the Piazza Carrara, fig.56).⁴ In this case the breastfeeding figure represents a personification of *Pisa* who kneels in supplication to Duke Ferdinand I de' Medici, the ruler of Tuscany, and follows the tradition of representing Pisa as a suckling mother started by Giovanni Pisano a few years prior to Tino's adoption of the motif as an attribute of Charity.

Publicly funded monumental art generally conveys political messages from governmental authorities. The propagandist implications of Tino di Camaino's *Charity* and Pietro Francavilla's *Pisa* are very different and reflect the differing political landscapes of *Trecento* and *Cinquecento* Tuscany. This chapter will primarily examine the force and complexity of political messages conveyed by images of breastfeeding in *Trecento* Tuscany and the links between personifications of Charity, Mary and other associated figures, overtly expressed by the common use of the breastfeeding motif. It will also consider the connection between the breastfeeding iconography used for personifications of Charity and the concept of charity within late mediaeval and renaissance Italian culture and society. Why was the breastfeeding imagery, so much a domestic and feminine concept, found to be so

⁴Pope-Hennessy, 1970; Seidel, 1977, 45-46.

appropriate in the male world of political propaganda? Finally, the gradual emergence in the *Quattrocento* and *Cinquecento* of pagan imagery which included similar iconography will be examined.

Modern academic literature on the virtues and vices is widely available but apart from a couple of now rather outdated works concerning themselves specifically with the iconography of Charity, little notice has been taken of the use of breastfeeding iconography in Italy. Yet the trend for depicting Charity as a breastfeeding mother is important in relation to the study of the representation of women in late mediaeval and renaissance art. Charity was the public face of *Maria lactans*, and she merged with many other female figures by virtue of her lactating status. The theological and personal messages conveyed by *Maria lactans* were given particular political slants by breastfeeding Charity and her public associates, demonstrating the flexibility of the breast iconography.

History of the Theological Virtue Charity.

William Levin has traced extensively the development of the concept of charity throughout Christian history and literature in his Ph.D. thesis and there is space for only a very abbreviated outline here.⁵ The Christian concept of charity originated in the Old Testament as an expression of love, both love for God and between men: *amor Dei* and *amor proximi*.⁶ These two forms of love are merged to some extent in the New Testament: when asked which is the greatest of the commandments Jesus replies ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart ...

⁵See Levin, 1983, 551-668.

⁶Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18.

this is the first and great commandment ... And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’⁷ St. Paul argues that if one has no charity, any other virtue one may have is worthless, because of all the virtues ‘the greatest ... is charity.’⁸ The Christian Fathers further developed these ideas. St. Jerome claims that charity is ‘the mother of all virtues’ and St. Augustine that ‘Charity is the means by which men are mutually connected to each other and to God.’⁹

Later Thomas Aquinas wrote extensively on the properties of charity and emphasised its dual nature: ‘... Charity has two [objects], namely God and one’s neighbour ... [but] God is the principal object of Charity and it is for his sake we love one another.’¹⁰ Although Aquinas believed that it was possible for acts of mercy to be conducted out of a desire for personal glory, other religious writers of the later Middle Ages tended to view love of God and love between men as being essential to each other. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, states that ‘... the love of God cannot have been perfected were it not nourished and increased through love of neighbour.’¹¹ In fact, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the differentiation between Charity, the love of God, and Mercy, the love between men, diminished and the two aspects became interchangeable because acts of mercy on earth were seen to express the inner love of God.¹²

⁷Matthew 22:35-40.

⁸Paul 1 Corinthians 13.

⁹Jerome, *PL*, 23, 742; Augustine, *PL*, 35, 878.

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1975 ed., 34, IIa IIae, qu.23 art.5. See also Thomas’s *Quaestione Disputatae* on Charity, 1984 ed., 40-45.

¹¹Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 1957-1977, VI-2, *Sententiae*, 1, 21, cited in Levin, 1983, 636.

¹²Freyhan, 1948, 69. See also Levin, 1983, 631-645.

Many texts concerning the nature of virtue and vice were written and reproduced between the early Christian period and the Late Middle Ages and the manuscript illuminations of many of these, perhaps particularly Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, developed identifying attributes and symbols for the virtues and vices which gave visual definition to the specific nature of each. This in turn influenced more public art.¹³ As one of the theological virtues, Charity appeared prominently in many illuminated texts concerning the virtues and vices throughout the Middle Ages, where her role as the mother of the virtues and the vital link between man and God, the conduit of nourishment and love, was illustrated. However, as a result of the manifold implications of the concept of charity, when symbolic attributes began to be developed to identify the personifications in cycles of the virtues and vices, artists encountered difficulty devising a straightforward attribute for Charity.¹⁴

In northern Europe the iconography of Charity/Misericordia developed from a figure surrounded with depictions of the acts of mercy defined in the gospel of Matthew, into a solitary figure holding of a bundle of clothes, signifying the love of man through the merciful act of providing clothing for the naked.¹⁵ Subsequently a

¹³See Katzenellenbogen, 1968 ed., for an examination of the iconography found in Prudentius' *Psychomachia*. For a discussion of the wider literary sources which influenced the development of the iconography of the virtues and vices in the *Trecento* and the *Quattrocento* see Tuve, 1963 and 1964. For a broad history and survey of mediaeval treatises on the vices and virtues see Newhauser, 1993. See also Hourihane, 2000, for a list of examples of personifications of Charity in the Index of Christian art and essays on virtue and vice.

¹⁴For a full description of the development of the iconography of Charity see Freyhan, 1948, 68-86. See also Boskovits and Wellershoff, 'Caritas', in *Lexicon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, 1968-1976, 5, 350-351.

¹⁵ Matthew, 25:35-36: 'For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.' See Freyhan,



fig.53 Tino di Camaino, *Charity*, c1321, Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.



fig.54 Giovanni Pisano, *Erythraean Sybil*, 1302-1310, Pisa, Duomo Pulpit.



fig.55 Nicola Pisano, *Charity*, 1265-68, Siena, Duomo Pulpit.



fig.56 Pietro Francavilla, *Duke Ferdinand I de' Medici and a Personification of Pisa*, 1594, Pisa, Piazza Carrara.



fig.57 Giotto, *Charity*, c1304-1313, Padua, Arena Chapel.

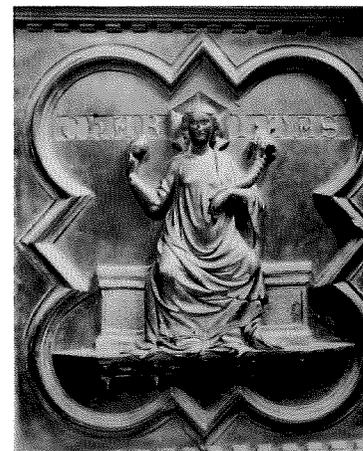


fig.58 Andrea Pisano, *Charity*, 1330s, Florence, Baptistery Doors.

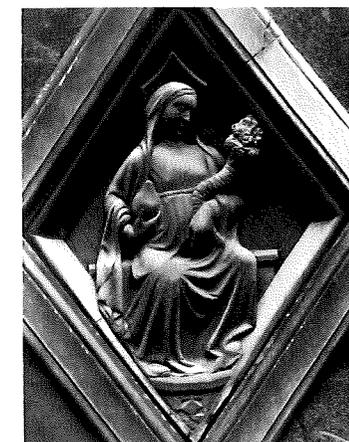


fig.59 Anon, *Charity*, 1350s, Florence, Campanile.

small figure, representing the recipient of the act of mercy, was included.¹⁶ This symbol differed from the attributes of other virtues because it entailed the depiction of an actual act of charity as opposed to a simple allegory (such as the scales which denote Justice).¹⁷ It also emphasised love of neighbour: the supposedly primary significance of Charity, love of God, had to be derived from an action which took place on earth, symbolic of love between men.

In Italy well into the thirteenth century, Charity was simply identified by an inscription, even when the other virtues had acquired their recognisable attributes.¹⁸ During the course of the *Duecento* the northern European iconography for Charity did become influential south of the Alps, but developed along completely different lines in Italy, where, for the most part, an alternative act of mercy was isolated: feeding the hungry rather than clothing the naked.¹⁹ In the late *Duecento* and early *Trecento* this was most commonly signified by personifications of Charity holding a vessel containing fruit, bread or grain (as in Giotto's representation of *Charity* in the Arena Chapel, Padua c1304-1313, fig.57) or an allegorical cornucopia, denoting fertility and abundance of food (as in Nicola Pisano's *Charity* on the Siena Duomo Pulpit, 1265-1268, fig.55, Andrea Pisano's bronze relief on the Florentine Baptistery doors of the 1330s, fig.58 and subsequently the relief on the Campanile in Florence, dating to the 1350s, fig.59). On the Pisa Baptistery Pulpit of 1260, however, Nicola Pisano depicted a figure, assumed to be the mother of the virtues, holding the hand

1948, 70-71; Katzenellenbogen, 1968 ed., 49, 60, 75-81.

¹⁶Freyhan, 1948, 71.

¹⁷See Tuve, 1964, 51, for a manuscript example of this anomaly.

¹⁸Freyhan, 1948, 68; see also Levin, 1983, 653-660.

¹⁹Freyhan, 1948, 71; Levin, 1983, 660-666. Indeed in several instances dating to the *Trecento*, Mercy was portrayed in the act of feeding a beggar, Levin, 1983, 663-664.

of a small *putto* who holds a basket of fruit or flowers (fig.60).²⁰ The iconographic combination of food and children clearly anticipates the development of the breastfeeding *Caritas* as depicted by Tino di Camaino around 1321.²¹

In addition to symbols of acts of mercy, in Italy a new element was added to the iconography of Charity in the *Duecento* in the form of burning vessels.²² Flames were added to the cornucopia held by *Charity* on the Siena Duomo Pulpit and to the small vessel Giovanni Pisano's *Charity* holds on the Pisa Duomo Pulpit (fig.61). In several later examples flames issued from the heart of Charity or spread up from her head (as in examples by Orcagna and Giovanni di Balduccio, figs 62-63). The concept of burning light derived both from the idea of religious light, whereby pure light is representative of God, and from a symbol of profane and even sexual love, associated with Venus or Amor.²³ A developing contemporary belief that earthly love was a vital component of spiritual love (despite a sexual connotation) legitimised the adaptation of symbols of profane love for a strictly religious and even chaste personification.²⁴

²⁰Freyhan, 1948, 71; Levin, 1983, 660.

²¹The Erythraean Sybil on the Pisa Duomo Pulpit dating to 1302-1310 by Giovanni Pisano which holds a child and two cornucopiae, is presumably also related (fig.54).

²²Freyhan, 1948, 72-74

²³Freyhan, 1948, 74-76.

²⁴Freyhan, 1948, 72-85. Freyhan discusses the theory of spiritual and secular love, kept strictly apart by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas but considered to be essential to each other by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St Francis and St. Bonaventura. Italian poetry of the *dolce stil nuovo* merged concepts of erotic and spiritual love, and further emphasised this belief. Thus symbols of secular love were available for being iconographically adapted to represent spiritual love by Italian artists of the late Middle Ages.



fig.60 Nicola Pisano, *Charity*, 1260, Pisa, Baptistery Pulpit.



fig.61 Giovanni Pisano, *Charity*, 1302-1310, Pisa, Duomo Pulpit.



fig.62 Orcagna, *Charity*, 1350s, Florence, Orsanmichele Tabernacle.



fig.64 Giovanni Pisano, *Personification of Pisa*, c1312-13, Pisa, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.



fig.63 Giovanni di Balduccio, *Charity*, c1330, Washington, National Gallery.



fig.65 Nicola Pisano, *Personification of Perugia*, 1270s, Perugia, Fontana Maggiore.

The combination of flame and food symbols unites the two aspects of Charity, love of God and love between men. Even Giotto's representation of *Charity* in the Arena Chapel, dating to the first decade of the *Trecento*, which is different from any of the Pisano adaptations to that date, fits this description (fig.57). The Arena Chapel *Charity* holds a basket of fruit in one hand and a heart in the other. The food is held low, on the level of man, and the heart up towards heaven. The heart is an obvious symbol of both sacred and secular love, it is also a symbol closely associated with the female breast, both can be seen as the source of love.²⁵ Although Giotto's conception of Charity was not entirely imitated by any of his followers, the symbol of the gifted heart was taken up: Andrea Pisano's *Charity* holds a cornucopia and a burning heart on the first set of Baptistery doors in Florence and the *Charity* on the second level of relief sculptures on the Campanile also holds a large heart.²⁶

Tino di Camaino united and extended all these symbols of charity, combining food dispensation, small children, fertility and abundance and even

²⁵Arms folded over the breasts is a traditional expression of deep devotional feeling which in one sense can be interpreted as love of God, see Levin, 1996, 261-263. Similarly one hand on the breast or, as discussed in Chapter One, the actual exposure of a breast, could be an act of supplication, see Seidel, 1977, 73-76. Connected to this is a Venetian image of Charity handing out food to the needy with one hand and placing her second hand on her womb, dating to the mid-*Trecento*, Levin, 1983, 660-661. All these gestures are expressions of love and intimately connect the reproductive organs of a woman with her heart, the source of loving emotion.

²⁶Freyhan, 1948, 80-81. Freyhan goes on to discuss further examples of portrayals of Charity dating to the first half of the *Trecento*, the iconography of which makes the figures identifiable with personifications of Amor or Venus/Cupid. The most notable example of this is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's use of an arrow or spear as an attribute for Charity (as in the Allegory of Good and bad Government in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena). This symbol is clearly related to the arrows which Cupid uses to fell his human victims and affect them with profane love, Freyhan, 1948, 81-82. See also Panofsky, 1972, 79-157.

spiritual and secular love, when he adapted the suckling motif in his personification of *Charity*. He also entirely de-eroticised the notion of love between men; the unconditional love of a mother for her baby is a very human emotion but it cannot be construed as sexual love.

Tino's monumental figure is crowned, yet her robe is simple and she protectively holds two small children to her large breasts which are evidently well-supplied. Tino's style and broad composition has suggested to modern writers that this *Charity* was meant to embody a 'woman of the people'.²⁷ This is not necessarily so: the sculpture has an imposing air of calm authority and dignity and was clearly influenced by the monumental figures of Nicola Pisano and Giotto.

What inspired Tino to use this iconography? Certainly, theological writers of the Middle Ages had on many occasions linked Charity, and particularly the dual nature of Charity, with the two breasts of a woman. Alain of Lille states that: 'The two breasts of the Virgin are the two arms of Charity ... Moreover, elegantly, the breasts are called two rivulets of Charity, because women usually offer breasts for nursing to those young ones whom they love ...'²⁸

While this theology, and the developing iconography of *Maria lactans* in the early *Trecento*, (particularly in his native Siena) legitimised Tino's adaptation of the breastfeeding motif, even more important was the fact that Tino had been a member of the workshop run by Giovanni Pisano. He had therefore been involved in various of the projects produced by the workshop which developed the iconography of

²⁷Valentiner, 1935(a), 79; Levin, 1983, 671-672.

²⁸Alain of Lille, *PL*, 210, 62, 79. See Levin, 1983, 646-652, for many more literary examples of the mediaeval association between breasts and Charity.

Charity charted above and, more pertinently, had produced two prominent sculpted breastfeeding figures in Pisa, although neither was a representation of Charity.

Giovanni Pisano's Breastfeeding Figures.

The more important of these two figures, in relation to Tino's breastfeeding *Charity*, was part of a group of figures, originally above the S. Ranieri portal of the Pisa Duomo, executed by Giovanni Pisano around 1312-1313, (Pisa, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo fig.64).²⁹ Knowledge of the composition of this group stems from Vasari's life of Giovanni Pisano:

'In like manner, over the side door that is opposite the Campanile, there is a Madonna of marble by the hand of Giovanni, having on one side a woman kneeling with two babies, representing Pisa, and on the other the Emperor Henry.'³⁰

He goes on to give inscriptions which were below each sculpture; in the case of the kneeling woman 'The handmaid of the Virgin, I am Pisa, tranquil under her protection'.³¹ These sculptures were lost until the last century when two badly damaged fragments were identified as the *Madonna and Child* and the

²⁹Seidel, 1987, 179-196; Peroni, cat. entry by Novello, 1995, 626-627 and Pope-Hennessy, 1996, 52

³⁰Vasari, *Le Vite*, 1966 ed., 2, 69-70, translation from de Vere, 1996 ed., 1, 82.

³¹'Virginis Ancilla Sum Pisa Quieta Sub Illa' Vasari, *Le Vite*, 1966 ed., 2, 70.

personification of *Pisa*.³² The latter figure evidently originally nursed two small children, although both babies and breasts are now missing.³³

This ensemble was sculpted to commemorate a visit of Henry VII to the city in 1313 following his imperial coronation in Rome. The visit of a Holy Roman Emperor to Pisa had many political implications. He had travelled South from Germany in the hope of imposing his rule and uniting the many small political units which comprised Italy at the time and which were suffering badly from factional fighting, both within and between states.³⁴ Although nominally the ruler of all Christendom and crowned by the Pope's representatives in Rome, he was not universally accepted in Italy. His welcome to Pisa as the new Ghibelline Messiah contrasted sharply with rival Florence's refusal to acknowledge him.³⁵

The commemorative sculpture group above the S. Ranieri Portal therefore clearly stated Pisa's allegiance to the new Emperor. But despite the city's willingness to accept him as overlord, it wanted to maintain its independence and this was reflected in the composition of the sculptural group described by Vasari. Although no part of the figure of Henry VII survives, it is clear that the Emperor-figure must have been of similar proportions to the personification of *Pisa*. Situated either side of the Madonna, both were kneeling and both were apparently presented to the Virgin by an angel.³⁶ Had Henry been any bigger than *Pisa*, the

³²See Peroni, cat. entry by Novello, 1995, 626-627, for a brief summary of the history and literature concerning these fragments.

³³Peroni, cat. entry by Novello, 1995, 627.

³⁴Larner, 1971, 20-21. For accounts of Henry's doomed expedition to Italy see Bowsky, 1960 and Schevill, 1961, 1, 182-193.

³⁵Hyde, 1973, 138-139; Seidel, 1977, 84.

³⁶Seidel, 1987, 179-182. Seidel discusses the sources for Giovanni's composition of the S. Ranieri sculptural group, which includes a very similar group above the main

composition would have lacked symmetry. The larger Madonna-figure, on the other hand, originally situated between the two, would have dominated them both.³⁷

As Max Seidel has pointed out, the use of the breastfeeding motif in a personification of a city was entirely new at Pisa.³⁸ Other personifications of cities, such as the image of *Perugia* on the Fontana Maggiore by Nicola Pisano, commonly held cornucopiae, another symbol associated with Charity in the late *Duecento* (fig.65).³⁹ But whilst cornucopiae denote fertility, plenty and beneficence, desirable associations for city governments, the nursing motif presses the point home and emphasises love. The government of Pisa loved the citizens of Pisa and would nourish and protect them, just as a mother would her children, and in return the citizens of Pisa would love their city. Seidel suggests that current ideas which aligned the concept of a city with the concept of charitable love were responsible for Giovanni's innovation. For instance, in a sermon in Florence in 1304, Fra Giordano da Rivalto stated that '*Civitas* [city] sounds very like *Caritas* [love] ... and through love cities are built, because men take delight in being together'.⁴⁰

In Giovanni's personification of *Pisa* the use of the breastfeeding motif expresses a relationship of charitable love between the city and her citizens and characterises Pisa as a mother, even fertile Mother Earth. The pairing of the

portal of the Duomo in Siena. Here angels present to the Virgin a kneeling personification of Siena and a representation of Buonaguida Lucari, the city official who dedicated Siena to the Virgin on the eve of the city's famous triumph at Montaperti - highly politicised imagery, see Seidel, 1987, 188-189. The figure of Siena does not breastfeed, however.

³⁷Seidel, 1977, 46, 80.

³⁸Seidel, 1987, 190-191.

³⁹Pope-Hennessy, 1996, 4th ed. 1, 28-33.

⁴⁰Translated from quotation in Seidel, 1987, 191. Thomas Aquinas also stated that the virtue love was vital in the construction and conservation of a city.

patriarchal figure of the Emperor with Pisa further suggests the fruitful union of paternal and maternal figures. Moreover, the relative proportions of the two figures signified that despite looking to the Emperor for protection, Pisa was capable of providing for her citizens. The nursing motif eloquently emphasises this point: the city would love and nourish its dependants like a mother and as Mary had Christ. The powerful associations of the nursing motif, particularly with Mary and Christ and their universal and redeeming love, enhanced the message of the personification of *Pisa* extensively. The sacred theological *lactans* motif was adapted to make a strong political statement.

Inside the Pisa Duomo the figural sculpture below Giovanni Pisano's pulpit of 1302-1310 includes his second breastfeeding figure, apparently originally painted with a blue cloak and gold crown (figs 66-67).⁴¹ There has been some confusion over the identity of this figure. In a late sixteenth-century description of the pulpit by Raffaello Roncioni, the figure is related to the personification of *Pisa* on the exterior of the Duomo and is also entitled *Pisa*.⁴² This identification was accepted and repeated by historians into the twentieth century. But Roncioni was writing around 1595, at a time when Pisa had been subsumed into the Duchy of Tuscany, ruled by the Florentine Medici family, and Max Seidel has argued that his text is therefore

⁴¹Valenziano, 1993; Peroni, cat. entry by Novello, 1995, 502-508 and Pope-Hennessy, 1996 4rth ed., 1, 236. The pulpit was dismantled after a fire in the Duomo in the late sixteenth century. It was reconstructed in 1926, although many feel that it has not been reassembled correctly, so that the original programme is obscured, Ayrton, 1969, 158, 223-226; Jászai, 1968. The alternative plan for reconstruction suggested by Jászai does not significantly change the position of the breastfeeding figure. The most recent programme suggested by Kreytenberg, however, places all the important figures at the front of the pulpit, towards the congregation, including *Ecclesia* and Christ, see Kreytenberg in Valenziano, 1993, 17-26.

⁴²See Seidel, 1977, 44-48.



fig.66 Giovanni Pisano *Ecclesia? supported by four Cardinal Virtues*, 1302-1310, Pisa, Duomo Pulpit.



fig.67 Giovanni Pisano, *Ecclesia? detail*, 1302-1310, Pisa, Duomo Pulpit.

likely to reflect nostalgia for the time of Pisa's independence from Florence. Roncioni's identification of the breastfeeding figure on the pulpit is thus very probably propagandist and may have been written in reaction to the appearance of Pietro Francavilla's sculpture denoting a breastfeeding personification of Pisa bending in supplication to the figure of Duke Ferdinand I de' Medici, in 1594 (fig.56).⁴³

While the *Trecento Pisa* gave allegiance to the Virgin but set herself on the same level as Emperor Henry VII, reaffirming her independence and strength, the later *Pisa* is forced to accept the domination of the Duke of Tuscany.⁴⁴ Florence is the ruling power and expects Pisa's fealty, subservience and allegiance. Certainly, the city must rule well and care for its citizens - symbolised by the breastfeeding motif - but ultimately Florence will defend and rule, as is clear from the towering strength and swaggering nobility of the figure of the Duke. The kneeling figure of *Pisa* looks up towards the Duke's face adoringly and beseechingly while she places her right hand on his arm in a gesture of submission. Love, emanating from the city to the citizens is still an element of this sculpture and connoted by the breastfeeding motif, but the real focus of love is the Duke, it is at him the woman gazes while her babies suckle and slide from her knees almost unnoticed. Francavilla's sculpture placed Pisa firmly in the role of dependent and the propaganda could not be clearer: Francavilla's adaptation of Pisano's motif and pose for *Pisa* and the placement of the sculpture in a very public position near the Palazzo Gambarcorti, the seat of Pisan government, ensured that the people of Pisa, who for so long would have been familiar with Pisano's sculpture, could not fail to understand the implied meaning. It

⁴³Bacci, 1926, 61-66; Seidel, 1977, 45.

⁴⁴Seidel, 1977, 45.

seems highly likely that the affront which this statue would have caused proud Pisan citizens may have driven Roncioni to write his strongly patriotic text and further glorify Pisa's past by erroneously identifying her with the pulpit figure.⁴⁵

The most extensive modern analysis of this breastfeeding figure argues strongly that she is in fact *Ecclesia* with the Holy Spirit overshadowing her in the form of a dove, and most art historians now concur with this analysis.⁴⁶ The early Christian fathers and theological writers of the Middle Ages had used the motif of a breastfeeding woman to denote Mother Church: the twelfth-century theologian, Honorius of Autun, for instance, writes: '... the Church, whose breasts are the two Testaments, from which unschooled souls take on the milk of doctrine ...'⁴⁷ The identification of the breastfeeding sculpture as *Ecclesia*, in the context of the interior of a church and on a pulpit from which divine knowledge is passed from priest to laity, appears more likely than that she represented a strongly civic personification of Pisa, particularly as this was executed before the sculpture group above the S. Ranieri portal. In the pulpit sculpture the breastfeeding motif allegorically expresses the spiritual nourishment of the Christian congregation.

⁴⁵In Arezzo, another city which came under Medici dominion in the *Cinquecento*, a similar statue of the Duke was erected with the same function as the one in Pisa; the Arezzo sculpture did not include a kneeling breastfeeding figure, however, see Seidel, 1977, 45. The use of the figure in Pisa clearly relates to the tradition of personifying the city with a breastfeeding woman started by Giovanni Pisano, and adds an extra edge of meaning to Francavilla's Pisan sculpture.

⁴⁶Seidel, 1977, 44-98. See also Valenziano, 1993, 56-62 and Novello cat. entry in Peroni, 1995, 502-503.

⁴⁷Honorius of Autun, *Expositio in Canticum canticorum*, I, 1, *PL*, 172:361. See also quotations from Sts. Bernard and Catherine in Chapter One, notes 58 and 65. For various other interpretations of the figure see Levin, 1983, 696-698.

This argument tends to be confirmed by the fact that *Ecclesia*, which is one of several caryatid figures supporting the upper level of the pulpit, is specifically paired with a caryatid figure of Christ.⁴⁸ Only Christ and *Ecclesia* are supported by four lower figures; Evangelists in the case of Christ and in the case of *Ecclesia*, what are generally assumed to be the four cardinal virtues, *Fortezza*, *Prudenza*, *Giustizia* and *Temperanza*.⁴⁹ It seems unlikely that Giovanni would have implied that the city of Pisa was the equal partner of Christ when the S. Ranieri portal clearly placed her inferior to Mary, even though on a level with Henry VII. This pairing of *Ecclesia* with Christ on the Pisa Duomo pulpit recalls the mediaeval interpretation of the *Song of Songs* where Christ and the Church were defined as the central protagonists, the bride and groom.⁵⁰

However, *Ecclesia* was often elided with the figure of Mary during the late Middle Ages and the breastfeeding motif connects the sculpture to images of *Maria lactans* and the theological writings, particularly those concerning the *Song of Songs*, which allegorise the Virgin's two breasts and give her the guise of bride of Christ. Moreover, Mary was the human embodiment of the theological virtue Charity: her charity to man in bringing the saviour into the world and interceding with him on behalf of the salvation of man, was symbolised by her lactating breast.⁵¹ And, as

⁴⁸See Valenziano, 1993, for analysis of the overall iconography of the pulpit. For the most extensive literary sources and analysis in relation to the figure of *Ecclesia* see Seidel, 1977 and Levin, 1983, 690-699.

⁴⁹There are questions relating to the identification of the four figures supporting *Ecclesia*: it has recently been suggested that they are in fact, Judith, Eve, Deborah and Sarah, (wife of Tobit), female figures from the Old Testament, the precursors of *Ecclesia*, and also, of course, Mary, Valenziano, 1993, 58-62.

⁵⁰See Chapter One, note 58.

⁵¹For many primary sources on the connection between Mary and Charity see Seidel, 1977, 49, 59-63, 70-77. Seidel connects the image of Mary baring her breast as a sign of intercession on the relief panel of the *Last Judgement* on the pulpit with the

discussed above, Charity was a virtue particularly associated with the ideal city. All these threads of meaning are implied by the motif of the lactating breast.

It is safe, therefore, to say that even if Giovanni Pisano did intend the breastfeeding figure to represent a personification of *Ecclesia*, this did not preclude further associations and interpretations.⁵² Furthermore, the fact that the same artist could use the same motif twice, so prominently and in such close proximity over the course of only a few years, does suggest some link in his mind between the two figures.⁵³ This is further indicated by the echoing of the pulpit pairing of *Ecclesia* and Christ in the implied union of Henry VII (the new Messiah) and the personification of *Pisa* above the S. Ranieri portal. The main connection between the two figures, manifested in the breastfeeding motif, is the concept of Charity. Love

Ecclesia figure and suggests that in the breastfeeding caryatid, honour is being paid to Mary, the patron saint of the Pisa Duomo. Mary and *Ecclesia*, therefore, represent corporeal and spiritual mothers, and the double breastfeeding motif is the sign of their merciful twofold aid to mankind, Seidel, 1977, 63-70. Giovanni Pisano used the breastfeeding motif in a third instance on the pulpit, on the base of the pulpit support where he executed a cycle of liberal arts. Here breastfeeding is used in the relief of *Grammar*. This links with the idea of the passing of wisdom via breastmilk, as discussed in Chapter One.

⁵² Various syntheses and combinations of *Ecclesia*, *Pisa*, *Mother Earth*, *Truth*, *Charity* and Mary have been suggested, see Seidel, 1977 for the literature interpreting the figure and see von Einem, 1962. Freyhan did not believe that the figure could be a straightforward depiction of *Ecclesia*, supported as she is by the cardinal virtues, not the theological virtues (1948, 84, n.1) and Levin has also suggested that the figure has a complex identity, 1983, 690-699.

⁵³ Seidel suggests that the iconography of the personification of *Pisa* is linked to the ideal city of Jerusalem, in some literature personified as a lactating mother during the Middle Ages and once more referring to Charity which was held to create unity and concord within an idealised city, Seidel, 1977, 84. The ideal city and *Ecclesia* would therefore look the same and reflect each other. He also suggests that on the Pisa pulpit, *Pisa* is represented by the large bird at the feet of and supporting *Ecclesia*, while simultaneously beseeching her mercy, Seidel, 1977, 77. Even in this case, *Pisa* is closely interwoven with the breastfeeding iconography and blurrings of meaning in the interpretations of the unschooled must have been common.

enabled cities and civilisation to develop and this was symbolised via the breastfeeding motif in the personification of *Pisa*. The mercy of God in imparting his divine wisdom and Mary in giving mankind Christ in human form was also symbolised by the *lactans* motif in the figure of *Ecclesia*. This tends to be confirmed by the fact that neither the personification of *Pisa* nor the representation of *Ecclesia* engendered any direct tradition of iconography except via personifications of Charity breastfeeding. The effective use of the breastfeeding motif to express various facets of charity probably influenced Tino di Camaino in his use of the breastfeeding motif for a definitive depiction of Charity.

It is precisely because the breastfeeding motif held manifold meanings and associations during the late Middle Ages that confusion over the identity of Giovanni Pisano's Pisa Duomo nursing figure has arisen. What does seem clear is that much of the modern argument about the identity of the figure is based on erudite mediaeval theology.⁵⁴ For the ordinary Pisan worshiper of the *Trecento* the implications may also have been complex but based on the most familiar associations, the numerous images of *Maria lactans* around at the time and the promise of security, safety and lack of hunger which these images held. Roncioni's identification of the pulpit figure may, therefore, relate more to traditional local interpretations rather than constitute a deliberate attempt at propaganda.

⁵⁴Indeed, Michael Ayrton claims that the overall programme of the pulpit was perhaps too ambitious and so complicated that it would not have been fully understood by the worshipping laity, see Ayrton, 1969, 161-162.

Tino di Camaino's Figure of Charity.

During his career Tino di Camaino sculpted several figures of Charity. As far as is known, on only one occasion did he adopt the breastfeeding motif and this appears to have been the first occasion when that motif was used in the context of Charity: this suggests that there was something specific about the commission which made it a particularly appropriate context for the use of the breastfeeding motif. Evidently he was influenced by Giovanni Pisano's breastfeeding figures, but neither of them represent straightforward depictions of Charity. Why did Tino not just give his *Charity* a cornucopia or a flaming vessel as an attribute, as had been commonly done in the Pisani workshop?

A possible explanation for the choice of iconography is that Tino was impressed by the strength of the political message conveyed by Giovanni's breastfeeding figure of *Pisa* above the S. Ranieri Portal, as were the officials of the city of Pisa who, around 1350, used the design of a breastfeeding woman with the motto *Pisa* beneath as an official seal for the city.⁵⁵ Like Giovanni's figure of *Pisa*, Tino's *Charity* was designed to be viewed at a height and was possibly the right-hand element of a group sculpture. It was therefore likely to have been intended for a location similar to that of Giovanni's S. Ranieri sculpture group: high on a building with sacred and also civic importance. (Even the most sacred buildings had civic importance at that time, of course, as they represented the pride and reputation of the towns which had invested in them).

Tino's use of the breastfeeding motif in such a context might further signify that the artist wanted to imply some eliding of the virtue Charity and the city of Florence, as Giovanni Pisano had done with *Pisa* and the pulpit figure of *Ecclesia*.

⁵⁵Levin, 1983, 692; Seidel, 1977, 80-83.

Tino's *Charity* is a very large sculpture; although she is seated her height is 136cm, which makes her larger than life-size and she inclines her head downwards, as if engaging viewers below with a meaningful glance: she would have been an arresting and imposing sight and it seems clear that wherever she was positioned, she was intended to convey very definite messages.⁵⁶

Through the adoption of the breastfeeding motif, both Giovanni's personification of *Pisa* and Tino's sculpture of *Charity* emphasise the highest priority of late mediaeval governments: food provision.⁵⁷ The obsession with food provision is found in many of the chronicles dating to the late Middle Ages written across Italy. The Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani lays much stress on detailing statistics relating to food supply in Florence in the first half of the *Trecento*; the mid-fourteenth-century poet Antonio Pucci likened the Florentine market to a garden of abundant fruitfulness and their contemporary from Milan, Bonvesin della Riva, entitled a whole chapter of his Milanese chronicle 'In Praise of Milan's Fertility and Abundance of Goods'.⁵⁸ As Petrarch advised

'Such is the righteous and laudable preoccupation of a good Prince: to reduce the hunger of the plebs with every effort and to procure for his subjects plentiful foodstuffs ... a people are always driven to despair more from lack of foodstuffs than from a deficiency in moral qualities. Thus the

⁵⁶Proportions from Seidel, 1987, 28.

⁵⁷Larner, 1980, 153.

⁵⁸Giovanni Villani, *Cronica*, 1844-1845 ed.; Antonio Pucci, 'Proprietà del Mercato Vecchio', 1952, for a translation of this poem see Dean, 2000, 122-124; Bonvesin da Riva *Il tracto*, 1872 ed., for a translation of a large part of the chapter concerning the abundance of Milan see Dean, 2000, 11-16. See also Hyde, 1973, 156; Larner, 1980, 211-215.

happiness of every nation consists more in the well-being of the body than of the Spirit.’⁵⁹

Petrarch further points out that the very security of the state depends on these concerns for ‘... no one is more terrifying than a starving commoner’.⁶⁰

Beggars were ubiquitous across Europe during the late Middle Ages and were constantly in need of clothing, food and shelter, but in times of shortage, people who normally did have enough, even if they were at the lower end of the social scale, would quickly suffer from lack of food. A small-scale, communal government such as that in Florence in the fourteenth century was inherently unstable and particularly vulnerable in times of famine and want.⁶¹ Lacking divine authority and even a permanent army, with the executives continually changing and factional disputes continually erupting, the oligarchic government of Florence endeavoured to manipulate the populace and avoid uprisings and revolts with carefully staged processions, which included ritual acts of charity and the use of sacred images.⁶²

The installation of a monumental sculpture of a personification of *Charity* breastfeeding two small children in some prominent position within the city can therefore be understood as the embodiment of a promise to the less fortunate that

⁵⁹Petrarch, writing in a letter to Francesco da Carrara, Lord of Padua in the 1370s, advising him on the government of his state, see *Rerum Senilium liber XIV. Ad magnificum Franciscum de Carraria Padue dominum. Epistola I. Qualis esse debeat qui rem publicam regit*, 1922, translation by Kohl in Kohl and Witt, 1978, 56.

⁶⁰Petrarch, *Rerum Senilium liber XIV, Epistola I.*, 1922, translation by Kohl in Kohl and Witt, 1978, 56.

⁶¹Trexler, 1980, 340.

⁶²Trexler, 1980, *passim*, but see particularly 331-364.

food would always be supplied to them. The large breasts of Tino di Camaino's *Charity* are abundantly supplied with milk just as the city of Florence would be abundantly supplied with food. But while the breastfeeding motif adopted by Tino may have provided a comforting image of abundance for the poorer section of society it can also be interpreted as a general appeal for love between men, *amor proximi*. In 1301, Dino Compagni gave a speech in the Florentine Baptistery in an attempt to unite the governing class of Florence: 'Dear and worthy citizens, who have all alike received sacred baptism at this font, reason compels and binds you to love one another like dear brothers, especially since you possess the most noble city in the world.'⁶³

Tino's figure of *Charity* embodies a permanent endorsement of Dino Compagni's appeal. The suckling child on the left of this sculpture is positioned with its back to the viewer and is semi-draped, while the naked body of the child on the right is facing forwards as he turns his head to the breast and his small penis emerges between the fingers of Charity's supporting hand. This iconography has been described as 'intriguing' in a recent work on Italian gothic sculpture, which also suggests that the left child is slipping from the lap of Charity.⁶⁴ The apparently precarious position of the left child is, in fact, simply explained by the emphasis on the width of the figure, while the depth of her lap is slightly foreshortened, which suggests that she was designed to be viewed from below. The deliberate inclusion of the child's penis does appear to suggest some intended meaning, however. Possibly it is a signifier of *amor proximi*, love between men. The attention drawn to Christ's penis in many mediaeval and renaissance images emphasised his human nature; and

⁶³Dino Compagni, *Chronicle of Florence*, 1986 ed., II, 8.

⁶⁴Moskowitz, 2001, 114.

images of his circumcision, where his blood was spilt, verified his humanity.⁶⁵ In the case of Tino's *Charity*, the penis may represent a similar reference to humanity: this child, symbol of love between humans, is turned outwards to the world and relates to the concept of profane love. On the other hand, the clothed child is turned away from the world and could represent *amor Dei*, love of God, or celestial love.⁶⁶

The belief that fraternity, bound by neighbourly love, would lead to peace and concord and therefore a prosperous and strong state is constantly implied in the various statutes of guilds and confraternities and governmental ordinances during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁶⁷ Visual evidence of this belief is found most famously in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 1330s *Allegory of Good and Bad Government*. In this fresco what is presumed to be a personification of the commune of Siena - good government - is surrounded by the three theological virtues which evidently direct the deeds of good government.⁶⁸ Charity is positioned at the highest level, directly above the head of the figure (fig.68). A fresco of the Virgin and Child, also by Lorenzetti, in the open loggia at the back of the Palazzo Pubblico, is even more explicit in its implication that charity between men will lead to good government. The baby Christ blesses a black and

⁶⁵Bynum, 1991, 79-84; Steinberg, 1983.

⁶⁶Titian's painting of nearly two hundred years later *Sacred and Profane Love* reversed this iconography; in this case it is the personification of celestial love which appears naked and terrestrial love which is clothed in her worldly finery.

⁶⁷Henderson, 1994, 16-20.

⁶⁸See Norman, 1995, 2, 145-167 for political analysis of these frescoes painted by Lorenzetti in the late 1330s in the Sala dei Nove, the governmental meeting hall of the Palazzo Pubblico. Here we also find the civic emblem of the nursing wolf positioned at the feet of the personification of Siena, and representing the ancient origins of the city, Norman, 1995, 2, 157. See also Donato in Donato, Fragoni, and Monciatti, 2002, 212-253 and Castelnovo, Donato and Brugnolo, 1995.

white globe, which, like the figure of good government on the inside of the palace, is evidently meant to represent Siena, because black and white were the colours of the Sienese *balzana*. A scroll held by Christ bears the inscription ‘A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another’.⁶⁹

But the virtue Charity also conveyed a very specific Christian directive to individuals as well as governments. In his dictionary of the early fourteenth-century, Petrus Berchorius personifies the virtue Mercy as a woman and lays emphasis on her breasts and milk. He states that people who ‘emit the fruit of Good works, distil the milk of alms, and in their milk recreate and comfort the poor,’ and eventually these people will ‘from the breasts of divine mercy ... feed in perpetuity.’⁷⁰

There was however, a fairly limited view of who the deserving poor were. Widows and orphans particularly came into the category, not surprisingly, as both were more often than not without any financial support and abandoned babies were huge in number.⁷¹ This emphasis on children as the main recipients of charity is an important element in the development of iconography connected with the virtue Charity in Italy. Art commissioned by charitable confraternities often contains reference to the care of abandoned children.⁷² There is for instance a tiny depiction of *Charity* suckling one child on the border decoration of the *Allegory of Mercy* in

⁶⁹Larner, 1971, 86.

⁷⁰Petrus Berchorius, *Dictionarii*, 1583, ‘Lac’ II, 369. Cited in Levin, 1983, 650-651.

⁷¹Larner, 1980, 79

⁷²Levin 1983, 703. An altarpiece of the *Madonna of Mercy* in Gubbio by Ottavio Nelli, dating to c1410, includes in the predella an image of a swaddling child being given into the care of a wetnurse and her family. Levin has speculated that the care of the abandoned may therefore have constituted the main charitable works of the members of the confraternity who were the patrons of this work and who appear as supplicants in the main panel, opposite a number of other swaddling babies.

the Sala dell'Udienza of the Bigallo, Florence.⁷³ The Bigallo was the meeting place of the Compagna di S. Maria della Misericordia, the second biggest confraternity in Florence in the *Trecento* and one which concerned itself mainly with the reception of abandoned children, passing them on to more permanent residence with foster families or in orphanages.⁷⁴

As noted in Chapter One, Mary's intercessory role was an important element of implied meaning in images of *Maria lactans* dating to the late mediaeval and renaissance period. But intercession was a two-way bargain: Mary would intercede for man if in return he was equally merciful to his fellow human beings, and this mercy took the form of good works, or charity. During times of disaster ritualised acts of charity were performed in order to persuade the Virgin to intervene on behalf of everyone: according to Giovanni Villani charity as well as prayers saved Florence in 1333.⁷⁵

By his adaptation of the breastfeeding motif Tino contrived to visually link Charity to the lactating Virgin and the concept of the milk of Mercy, thereby invoking both love of God and love between men; Mary expresses her love of God

⁷³Levin, 1983, 704.

⁷⁴See also Levin's 1996 article in which he examines frescoes on the exterior of the Bigallo, again depicting the reception and care of many abandoned and lost children by the members of the confraternity. See Henderson, 1994, *passim* for this and other Florentine confraternities. It is also relevant to point out that the mid-*Trecento* sculpture of *Maria lactans* by Andrea Pisano, situated on the facade of the oratory church, S. Maria del Pontenovo in Pisa (later called S. Maria della Spina), was partly financed by the charitable organisation the Opera di S. Maria del Pontenovo (fig.37). Thus the nursing Virgin dispenses her milk of mercy, symbolising and publicising the good works of the men who commissioned the sculpture, Levin, 1983, 700-702.

⁷⁵Giovanni Villani, *Cronica*, 1844-1845 ed., XI, 2. For further examples see Trexler, 1980, 351-354.

through the breastfeeding of the son of God, as well as her love of humans beings in as far as Christ was also human and the act was to bring salvation to mankind. Charity's role in bringing salvation to mankind, like Mary's, was bound up with the complex ideas surrounding the Eucharist and milk-blood and breast-wound parallels, as discussed in Chapter One. The Christian father St. Jerome wrote that the theological virtues were present at the crucifixion and this was depicted in some late mediaeval images of Christ on the cross: in some cases it is Faith, Hope and Charity who actually carry out the crucifixion and in others Charity, rather than an angel, collects the blood dripping from Christ's wound.⁷⁶ The implication to be taken from such images is that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was his great act of charity to man, enabling him to achieve eternal life. The confraternal organisations of the great Italian cities, which had religious as well as social functions, regularly celebrated the Eucharist together and believed that it was an act of the greatest fraternal love.⁷⁷

Charity was therefore an essential element of life in late mediaeval Italy, and its importance revolved around the issue of food, both physical and spiritual. In view of these considerations, Tino di Camaino's sculpture of *Charity* could have been designed to transmit various messages to the populace of Florence. In the first instance it reminded people of Jesus Christ's commandment to love God and one another, both on a personal scale by performing acts of charity for the good of their souls, and on the level of government for the sake of *Ben Comune*. It also represented a pledge to the poor that they would be provided for. Tino's sculpture, gazing beneficently down at the passing populace of Florence from some salient

⁷⁶Katzenellenbogen, 1968 ed., 38-39; Schiller, 1972, 2, 137-140.

⁷⁷Trexler, 1980, 85. In mediaeval manuscript illumination, where cycles of the seven sacraments were paired with cycles of the seven virtues, Charity's partner was the Eucharist - spiritual food and love, see Tuve, 1964, 71, who claims that the Eucharist was an essential part of Charity.

building, would have embodied not only Charity the theological virtue, but also the charity of Florence and therefore, in a sense, the city of Florence itself. Just as with the personification of *Pisa* above the S. Ranieri Portal on the Pisa Duomo, the breastfeeding motif enhances the meaning of the sculpture, characterising the love between the city and its citizens as the love between a mother and her children.

Tino's later representation of Charity on the Tomb for Catherine of Hapsburg, executed in Naples after his departure from Florence in 1322, is a caryatid figure, supporting the tomb, positioned between two piers in S. Lorenzo Maggiore. Two small children cling to her skirts but do not suckle (fig.69). In relation to this tomb Levin states that although '... neither child is suckling, this does not seem to change the iconographical meaning of the "attribute" children ...'.⁷⁸ On Tino's subsequent Neapolitan tombs for Charles of Calabria, Mary of Valois and Giovanni Durazzo children are not even included with Charity, who instead holds flaming tapers.⁷⁹ Robert Freyhan suggests that this was because such groups of figures were not viable for his requirements in Naples and that the meaning conveyed by the child/breast iconography was not precise enough.⁸⁰

Both Levin and Freyhan have failed to consider that possibly the Florentine *Charity* was intended for a very different location and carried far more civic significance than the Neapolitan sculptures of Charity. All Tino's Neapolitan depictions of Charity were located on tombs for members of a royal family. They were not publicly sponsored or situated and their meanings tended towards descriptions of the person whose tomb they decorated, and their virtuous lives. In

⁷⁸Levin, 1983, 673.

⁷⁹Freyhan, 1948, 84. See Moskowitz, 2001, 180-190.

⁸⁰Freyhan, 1945, 84.

these cases therefore, instead of expanding to encompass a city, its ever-changing government, attention to food supply and charitable organisations, Charity represented only an aspect of the individuals whose tomb she decorated.⁸¹ Tino's later sculptures of Charity were not, therefore, symbolic of the relationship between a city and her citizens. Because they were not designed to convey specific political messages, children, but more specifically breastfeeding, were not important elements of Charity's identifying iconography and could be omitted without prejudicing the meaning.

The later decades of the *Duecento* and the early decades of the *Trecento*, leading up to 1348 and the disastrous event of the Black Death, were punctuated by food shortages every few years, despite the eulogies on food abundance found in written accounts of the early *Trecento*.⁸² Giovanni Villani describes the dearth of grain in 1329:

'The famine was felt not only in Florence but throughout Tuscany and Italy, and so terrible was it that the Perugians, the Sienese, the Lucchese, the Pistoese and many other townsmen drove from their territory all their beggars because they could not support them ... The agitation of the [Florentine] people at the market of San Michele was so great that it was necessary to protect officials by means of guards fitted out with an axe and block'.⁸³

⁸¹This is not to suggest that Tino's later tombs were devoid of political meaning, they were in fact laden with Angevin propaganda, but still had a basically different function from the Bardini sculpture of *Charity*.

⁸²Larner, 1980, 154.

⁸³Giovanni Villani, *Cronica*, 1844-1845 ed., X, 118; cited in Schevill, 1961, 1, 237. See also Henderson, 1994, 273.



fig.68 Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, detail, 1330s, Siena, Palazzo Pubblico.



fig.69 Tino di Camaino, *Charity*, c1323, Tomb of Catherine of Hapsburg, Naples, S. Lorenzo Maggiore.



fig.71 Designed by Agnolo Gaddi, *Charity*, 1380-95, Florence, Loggia dei Lanzi.



fig.70 Biadaiolo Master, *The Distribution of Grain to the Needy at Orsanmichele*, c1335-40, Ms.laur. Tempi 3 c.79, Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana.

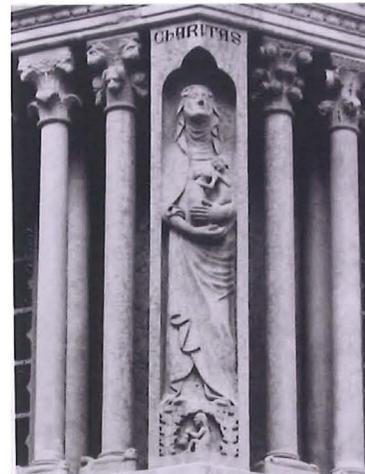


fig.72 Giovanni da Campione?, *Charity*, c1340, Bergamo, Baptistery.



fig.73 Giovanni Balduccio, *Charity*, c1335, Tomb of St. Peter Martyr, Milan, S. Eustorgio.

In the thirties and forties serious famine struck. During these bad years the people of the countryside would flock to their nearest towns, densely populated in the first place, in search of food.⁸⁴ Many towns drove out the starving; Florence, however, which at the best of times produced in its surrounding countryside only enough food to feed its citizens for five months of the year, endeavoured to cater for all.⁸⁵ As Giovanni Villani asserted during the dearth of 1329: '[Florence] supported in God's pity all the beggars of Tuscany'.⁸⁶

During periods of scarcity the government of Florence would step in and take measures to ensure enough grain was imported into the city, that prices did not rise too sharply and in the very worst times oversaw increased almsgiving and the baking of bread to be sold at subsidised rates.⁸⁷ Florence evidently prided itself on its *amor proximi*, but even so, severe punishments had to be employed to keep starving crowds calm, the axe and block being used to cut off a hand of 'any who ran up in tumult'.⁸⁸ The measures to ensure food supply were therefore not taken with entirely altruistic aims, but also to try to avoid the social disturbances which would erupt if people were starving. Domenico Lenzi records in his chronicle that crowds outside Orsanmichele during the dearth of 1329 alternated between calling for 'Mercy ... so that we do not die of hunger ...' and threats: 'Here is the badly governed city ... we

⁸⁴Henderson, 1994, 275; Larner, 1980, 183.

⁸⁵Larner, 1980, 154, 184.

⁸⁶Giovanni Villani, *Cronica*, 1844-1845 ed., X, 118, cited in Larner, 1980, 154.

⁸⁷Henderson, 1994, 273-286.

⁸⁸*Cronaca senese di Agnolo di Tura del Grasso* in the *Cronache senesi*, 483-485. translation from Dean, 2000, 172.

should like to go to the houses of these thieves who have some [grain] and set fire to them ...'.⁸⁹

It is not surprising then that during these increasingly disturbed years, Tino di Camaino's politically powerful iconography reappeared in specific politically significant locations in Florence. Around 1330 Giovanni di Balduccio executed a series of small quatrefoils with representations of Virtues, Apostles and Evangelists, which were possibly originally designed to decorate some part of a shrine in Orsanmichele dedicated to a miraculous image of the Virgin and Child.⁹⁰ One of these depicts a half-length figure of a woman, identified as *Charitas* by a scroll which she holds in her right hand (Washington, National Gallery fig.63).⁹¹ In her left hand she supports two tiny babies which nestle below her breast from which pour three flames, one upwards towards heaven, the direction in which she also looks, and two downward into the mouths of the babies. The conflation of several

⁸⁹Domenico Lenzi, *Specchio umano*, 1978 ed., 293-302, cited in Henderson 1994, 276. It is interesting also to note that, as William Levin has pointed out, the illuminator of the *Biadaiolo* manuscript dating to the 1330s used in one particular image a reversal of Tino's *Charity* iconography to illustrate and emphasise the confusion and chaos which ensued outside Orsanmichele when food was not available (Ms.laur. Tempi 3 c.79, Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana fig.70). A poor woman is depicted outside the edge of the illumination, sitting with two children on her lap, neither suckling. A man whips the group from inside the loggia of Orsanmichele while all around the crowd riot. In other words Charity has been abandoned, the children go hungry and violence breaks out, see Levin, 1983, 669-671.

⁹⁰Kreytenberg, 1990, 37-57; Cassidy, 1992, 197-198. Several of Giovanni di Balduccio's quatrefoil series were incorporated into the walls built to fill in the loggia in the 1360s, when the location of the grain store was moved so that Orsanmichele could become a full-scale church and the loggia was no longer needed for the purposes of grain selling, confirming an association between the quatrefoils and Orsanmichele.

⁹¹Valentiner, 1935(b); Freyhan, 1948, 84-85; Seidel, 1977, 57-58; Levin, 1983, 674-675.

iconographic elements, breastfeeding and flaming heart, stresses that the love of God and love between men are interdependent. The sculpture also clearly illustrates the permeable defining-line between the breast and the loving heart of a woman.

Situated halfway between the religious heart of Florence, the Piazza del Duomo, and its political heart, the Palazzo Vecchio, Orsanmichele was naturally a key site. As mentioned above, it was the place where grain was sold and consequently the place where crowds gathered and unrest ignited in times of food shortage. It would, perhaps, not be too fanciful to see it as the ‘breast’ of Florence, the source of nourishment for the populace. It was also the meeting place of the trade guilds of the city and the location of an extremely famous and popular miraculous image of the Virgin, whose powers, according to Giovanni Villani, healed the sick.⁹² Pilgrims flocked to visit this painting and left many donations and, as a result, the Confraternity of Orsanmichele, set up in 1291 to administer to the cult of the image, was one of the largest charitable organisations in Florence during the *Trecento*.⁹³ Giovanni di Balduccio’s adoption of breastfeeding iconography for sculpture associated with Orsanmichele is, therefore, entirely explicable, but perhaps particularly if he had the precedent of Tino’s sculpture of breastfeeding *Charity* already visible in a highly conspicuous location in the city.

The fact that Orcagna also used the breastfeeding motif to denote Charity in his sculptural decoration of the new tabernacle, built to house the famous image of Virgin and Child in the 1350s, tends to support the view that Giovanni di Balduccio’s quatrefoils were originally connected with the previous tabernacle.

⁹²Giovanni Villani, *Cronica*, 1844-1845 ed., VII, 155, see Henderson, 1994, 54.

⁹³Henderson, 1994, 196-237.

Orcagna's tabernacle, signed and dated 1359, was a unique construction, executed at huge cost with the proceeds collected by the Compagna della Madonna di Orsanmichele during the Black Death, which struck Florence in 1348.⁹⁴ It housed not the original miraculous painting, which had been destroyed by fire in 1304, but a third replacement commissioned from Bernardo Daddi in 1346.⁹⁵

Around the lower level of Orcagna's tabernacle, on the marble balustrade, is a series of eight scenes from the life of the Virgin. On three sides these are separated by a theological virtue and on the fourth by a small wooden door leading into the back of the tabernacle.⁹⁶ On the south side the *Nativity of Christ and the Annunciation to the Shepherds* is separated from the *Adoration of the Magi* by the relief of *Charity*, framed by a hexagon (fig.62).⁹⁷ Visitors to the tabernacle were both rich and poor - those seeking to give to charity and those seeking to gain from it - and this relates to the position of Charity between the humble shepherd and the wealthy Magi bearing gifts.⁹⁸ The unique double function of Orsanmichele, as the home of the Florentine grain store and the large charitable organisation, the Compagna di Orsanmichele, gave the use of the breastfeeding motif extensive resonance and meaning in that location. Visible through the open loggia both to pilgrims and starving crowds in times of famine, it promised the mercy of the Virgin both in this world and the next, both for those on the point of starvation and for those about to make a large charitable donation.

⁹⁴Cassidy, 1988, 174; Gavitt, 1990, 15-16. See Fabbri and Rutenburg, 1981, 385-405; Cassidy 1988 and 1992 and Kreytenberg, 1994 for detailed history of Orcagna's Tabernacle.

⁹⁵Kreytenberg, 1994, 25.

⁹⁶Cassidy, 1988, 175.

⁹⁷Kreytenberg, 2000, 120-121.

⁹⁸Levin, 1983, 681.

Orcagna's iconography for Charity differs from that of both Tino di Camaino and Giovanni di Balduccio in that his figure holds and suckles only one child. This adaptation links the figure of *Charity* even more directly to the Virgin Mary and her one Child and can be understood in terms of the location of the image on a shrine specifically dedicated to the Virgin. The combined socio-political events of the Black Death and war with Milan in the early 1350s, which threatened Florence's republican status, may have motivated Orcagna to further fuse the figure of Charity with the Madonna who gave succour to Florence in times of great hardship and fear.⁹⁹

In the last decade of the *Trecento* the breastfeeding *Caritas* appeared in an even more politically charged location, in the civic centre of the city, the Piazza della Signoria. The Loggia dei Lanzi was commissioned by the Florentine government in 1374 and is positioned adjacent to the Palazzo Vecchio.¹⁰⁰ Between 1380 and 1395 Agnolo Gaddi designed a series of seven virtues to decorate the spandrels above the arches of the loggia.¹⁰¹ Along the long side of the loggia are the cardinal virtues and along the shorter side *Faith, Hope* and *Charity*. Here, where crowds of government officials met, *Charity* is given clear prominence, set higher than her two companions, directly above the prime arch through which the government authorities would enter, and given a far more complex framing than all the other six virtues

⁹⁹Indeed, Brendan Cassidy has argued that much of the iconography was politicised, see Cassidy, 1988. The inclusion of the *Assumption of the Virgin* as the culmination of scenes from the life of the Virgin was unusual in Florence at that date and may relate to the fact that Milan withdrew from Florentine territory on the feast day of the Assumption in 1351, the year before the tabernacle was begun.

¹⁰⁰Norman, 1995, 1, 117; Moskowitz, 2001, 173-174.

¹⁰¹Frey, 1885, 36-39.

(fig.71). While the cardinal virtues and *Faith* and *Hope* are simple reliefs inside lobed frames set into the wall, *Charity* is a three-dimensional figure seated on a bench beneath a canopy jutting out from the surface of the wall.

The *Charity* figure on the Loggia dei Lanzi suckles only one child, linking her again to Mary, the miracle worker of Orsanmichele, the protector of Florence and the patron saint of the new Cathedral. In such a position and with such authority, *Charity* once more represented an exemplar of duty and love to the men who directed the fortunes of Florence, and who were invested within the loggia. She was also a representation of the nature of the city of Florence to the foreign dignitaries who would be greeted beneath her august presence.¹⁰²

The appearance of the breastfeeding Charity in Orsanmichele and above the arches of the Loggia dei Lanzi during the course of the *Trecento* demonstrates the effective nature of the iconography. It was an exhortation to mutual love amongst the powerful men who governed Florence and it represented comfort and a promise of abundant food supply to the populace, particularly in times of hardship. To visitors to the city it carried a message about the unity and strength of Florence, and its ability to provide for all. In addition it evoked the image of the Virgin Mary in her most merciful guise, suckling Christ, the saviour of mankind, emphasising her role as healer and defender of the people of the republic of Florence.

This iconographic tradition of representing Charity as a breastfeeding mother may have been initiated by Giovanni di Balduccio in his small quatrefoil in the 1330s at Orsanmichele. He too had been a member of the Pisani workshop and

¹⁰²Moskowitz, 2001, 173.

would have known the breastfeeding figures in Pisa. But the very existence of Tino's sculpture, most likely executed during his Florentine period, with its large proportions and powerful presence, suggests that it set the precedent in Florence. A question remains as to the exact location of the sculpture but the engaging and eye-catching nature of the breastfeeding motif and its broad range of association ensured that a complex religious and civic message could have been very easily communicated in one glimpse of the sculpture, and this suggests that it was located in a politically as well as religiously important spot. The most likely possibility appears to be that it was connected with a charitable organisation as were the main examples of breastfeeding Charities which appeared in Florence in the following decades and which were, presumably, influenced by Tino's sculpture.

Charity in the *Quattrocento*.

By the beginning of the *Quattrocento* the breastfeeding Charity was firmly established as traditional and easily identifiable iconography in any context and had spread outside Florence.¹⁰³ Giovanni di Balduccio repeated his formula of burning

¹⁰³On an exterior colonnade of the Baptistery in Bergamo the figure of *Caritas*, probably by Giovanni da Campione around 1340, suckles two small children and similar depictions are found on several Northern Italian tombs of the later *Trecento*, see Pope-Hennessy, 1996 4th ed., 1, 123 and Levin, 1983, 676-678 (fig.72). Levin cites further examples in Milan, Venice and Tuscany. In at least five editions of Cesare Ripa's hugely influential *Iconologia*, first published in 1603, Charity is defined as a woman accompanied by three children, one suckling, see Okayama, 1992, 31. Conversely a woman with breasts full of milk pushing a child away from her is representative of Avarice, and a woman with wasted breasts without milk, Infelicità, Okayama, 1992, 429, 347. In many ways Ripa's work crystallised the iconographic traditions which had developed and become established throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.

heart/breast and two children on the tomb of St. Peter Martyr in S. Eustorgio in Milan (fig.73).¹⁰⁴ The same formula (possibly again used by Giovanni di Balduccio) also appeared on the tomb of St. Augustine in S. Pietro in ciel d'oro in Pavia in the mid fourteenth century (fig.74).¹⁰⁵ Both these tombs include scenes from the lives of the respective saints, in which they are performing various acts of mercy.¹⁰⁶ This clearly is meant to convey the saintly characters of the two men and the breastfeeding personifications of Charity have a similar function, emphasising their virtues.

In the *Quattrocento* the figure of Charity suckling her children generally retreated into the interiors of Churches, mainly appearing on tombs, such as that of the frescoed monument for Cardinal Pietro Corsini in the Florentine Duomo, possibly by Giovanni dal Ponte c1422.¹⁰⁷ Charity appears in the company of the other two theological virtues and suckles only one child, in the later *Trecento* tradition and illustrates the Christian virtue of the illustrious citizen interred therein (fig.75).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴Moskowitz, 2001, 203-207.

¹⁰⁵Moskowitz, 2001, 209-213.

¹⁰⁶Levin, 1983, 675; Pope-Hennessy, 1996 4rth ed., 1, 118-20. On St. Augustine's tomb *Charity* appears amid such a multitude of figures she is easily missed and could not have been intended to have anything like the impact of Tino's sculpture.

¹⁰⁷For the Corsini tomb see Luchinat, 1994, 83-85 and 1995, 195-196.

¹⁰⁸For instances of Charity appearing on tombs with children but not actually breastfeeding see the monument of Hugo of Tuscany by Mino da Fiesole, c1471-1481 (Florence, Badia, fig.76), Pope-Hennessy, 1996 4rth ed., 2, 1996, 156, 379-380, and the tomb of Pope Paul II, also by Mino da Fiesole in the 1470s (Rome, St. Peters), Zuraw, 1998, 466. Zuraw discusses the appearance of isolated virtues on tombs of men who had figured prominently in Florentine public life in the later fifteenth century, and identifies them as political references to the civic virtue of such men, see Zuraw, 1998, 452-477. On the tomb of Sixtus IV by Antonello del Pollaiuolo, c1484-1493 (Rome, Sagrestia dei Beneficiati fig.77), Charity, positioned at the head of the Pope, does suckle, see Ettliger, 1978, 52-54, 148-151;



fig.74 Giovanni Balduccio? *Charity*, Tomb of St. Augustine, mid-14th century, Pavia, S. Pietro in ciel d'oro.

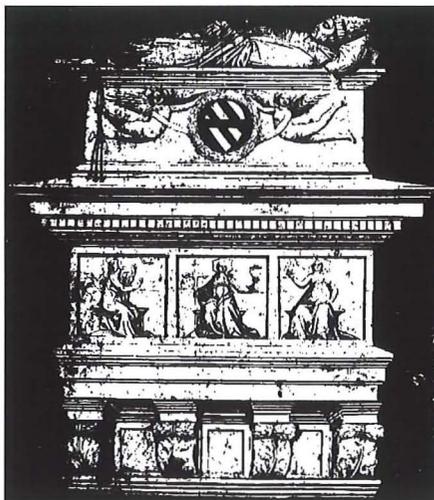


fig.75 Giovanni dal Ponte? Monument for Cardinal Pietro Corsini, c1422, Florence, Duomo.



fig.76 Mino da Fiesole, Monument of Hugo of Tuscany, c1471-1481, Florence, Badia.



fig.77 Antonello del Pollaiuolo, Tomb of Sixtus IV, c1484-1493, detail of *Charity*, Rome, Sagrestia dei Beneficiati.



fig.78 Piero Pollaiuolo, *Charity*, 1469, Florence, Uffizi.

One example of Charity from the second half of the fifteenth century did, however, appear in a highly political location in Florence. In 1469 Piero Pollaiuolo was commissioned to paint a series of virtues, starting with Charity, for the meeting place of the Mercanzia, a council made up of members of the Florentine guilds, which dealt with patronage of the guilds and law disputes between Florentines and foreigners (Florence, Uffizi fig.78).¹⁰⁹ This cycle of virtues evidently was designed to encourage the six men of the council to conduct their work in a fair, merciful and Christian manner and harks back to the Charities which appeared in Orsanmichele and on the Loggia dei Lanzi. The single baby on Charity's lap appears to emphasise this traditional reference.

In the years following the execution of Pollaiuolo's *Charity* the number of children depicted accompanying personifications of Charity began to increase. In the frescoed decoration of the Strozzi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella by Filippino Lippi, dating to c1487-1502, *Charity* appears with three children (fig.79).¹¹⁰ This painted figure is situated on the altar wall, to the left of the altar and Filippo Strozzi's tomb, at the base of a frescoed pillar which forms a triumphal arch over the window and tomb. Lippi's figure of *Charity* is a beautiful classicised image, crowned with a burning head-dress and surrounded by a large amount of drapery which crosses her chest revealing one breast for nursing. She raises one foot up onto a plinth which bears her title and in her right arm she supports a large baby, while a second rests on her raised knee and suckles at her breast. A third standing child emerges from her voluminous robe at her right foot.

Pope-Hennessy, 1996 4th ed., 2, 171-177, 400-401.

¹⁰⁹Ettlinger, 1978, 29, 142-145.

¹¹⁰For the chapel in general see Sale, 1979.

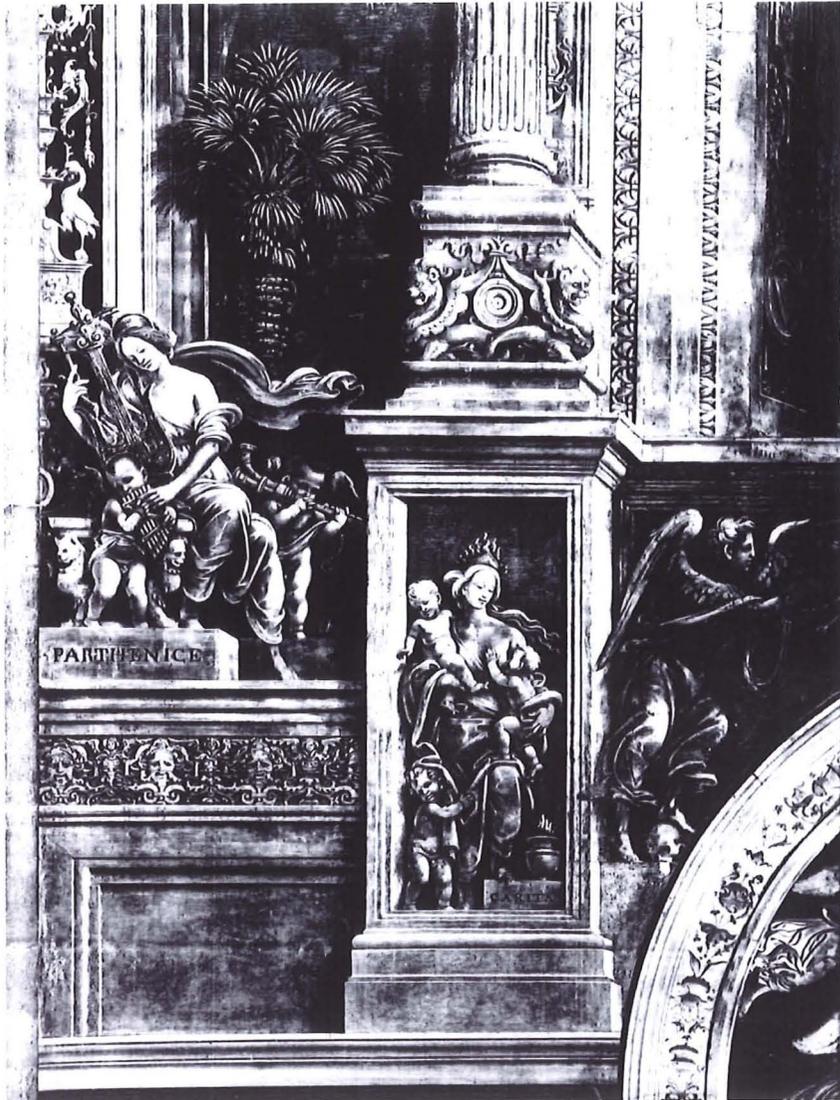


fig.79 Filippino Lippi, *Charity*, c1487-1502, Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Strozzi Chapel.

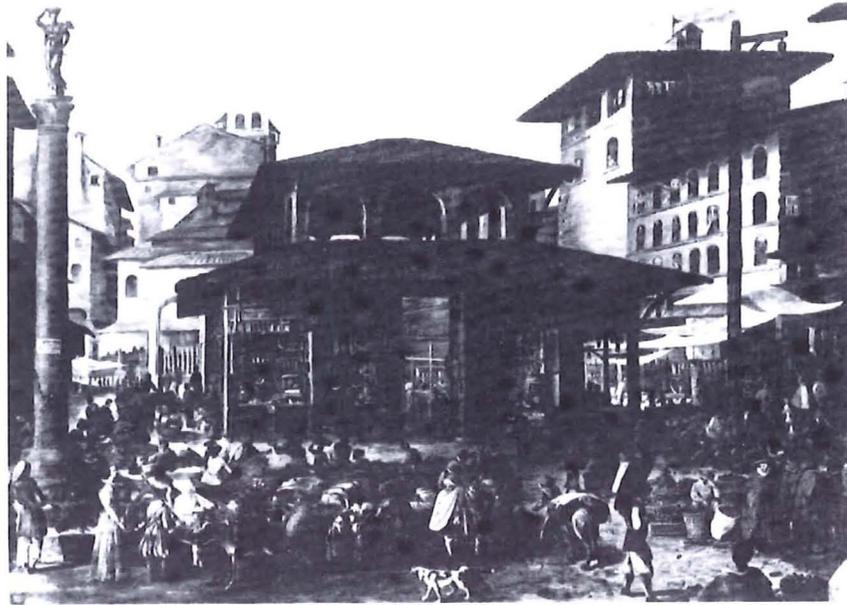


fig.80 Anon, *View of the Mercato Vecchio, Florence*, Calenzano, Bertini Collection.



fig. 81 Della Robbia Workshop, *Abundance*, early 16th century, Florence, Casa Buonarroti.

The increased number of children depicted with Charity may be linked to the emergence of Abundance, originally a pagan personification, as a separate persona in the culture of *Quattrocento* Florence. Around 1428-30 a statue by Donatello was placed on top of a pillar in the Mercato Vecchio, the open air market of Florence, (now the Piazza della Repubblica) positioned, like Orsanmichele, in the heart of the city.¹¹¹ This statue of *Dovizia*, or Abundance, which had an identity quite distinct from the Christian theological virtue Charity, is now lost but information as to its appearance has been gathered from surviving copies of the sculpture from the della Robbia workshop and various paintings of the market place executed before it was removed from the column in the eighteenth century (figs 80-81).¹¹² The figure was evidently of monumental size and represented a woman with a cornucopia on one arm and a basket of fruit balanced on her head.

It has long been recognised that Donatello's statue of *Dovizia*, a strong civic emblem, had close connections with mediaeval personifications of Charity, highlighted particularly by the iconographic motifs of cornucopia and fruit. Both these attributes were used to denote personifications of Charity in the *Trecento* and the message conveyed by Donatello's sculpture was not dissimilar, promising an unlimited food supply. Sarah Wilk has further pointed out that the statue may also have referred to the legendary almsgiving of the pagan Emperor Trajan, who started a tradition of adopting the figure of Abundance to proclaim the beneficence and wise rule of Roman Emperors.¹¹³ Most commonly seen on Roman coins, holding a

¹¹¹Bennet and Wilkins, 1984, 71-72.

¹¹²Wilkins, 1983.

¹¹³Wilk, 1986, 19-28.

cornucopia, Abundance came to personify Italy in the first and second centuries AD, and was a symbol of pre-Christian state Charity.¹¹⁴

Donatello's *Abundance* did not reveal her breasts, but the closest copies of the statue from the della Robbia workshop do include one bared breast (fig.81). Although this exposure of one breast probably reveals the desire of the artists to authentically replicate antique dress for a pagan figure, a breast is a particularly appropriate symbol for a personification of Abundance. It is also significant that in some examples of copies from the della Robbia workshop children were included around the skirts of Abundance and this further suggests a link in the minds of Donatello's contemporaries and followers between *Dovizia* and the traditional iconography of Charity (fig.82).¹¹⁵ The emphasis of Donatello's sculpture, however, had more to do with economics than with love. Situated right in the business centre of Florence it was a confident expression of the wealth of the city, rather than a moral exemplar. The breastfeeding motif, which expressed the infinite resources of love and compassion of Christian Charity, would have been inappropriate in the context of Donatello's *Abundance*.

The appearance of this statue in Florence, using antique iconography passed through a Christian filter and now unashamedly commercial, is a reflection of changing attitudes to wealth and poverty in fifteenth-century Florence. Exhortations to Charity and Mercy from churchmen continued into the *Quattrocento* in a very similar vein to those of the *Trecento*. Antoninus, Archbishop of Florence in the middle of the fifteenth century, was a figure much famed for his charitable works.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Wilk, 1986, 23-24.

¹¹⁵Wilk, 1986, 10-11.

¹¹⁶Pullan, 1994, I, 24.



fig.82 Giovanni Della Robbia, *Abundance*, Cleveland, Museum of Art.



fig.83 Botticelli, *Abundance*, c1482, London, British Museum.

In his view, charity erased sins and averted tumults and clamour by the famished plebs.¹¹⁷ Likewise, in various open-air sermons of the 1420s, S. Bernardino of Siena called for charity and warned that alms protected a city better than walls.¹¹⁸

The continuing accent on charitable works was coupled with a narrowing view of exactly who qualified for mercy and pity and, in particular, with a hardening attitude to beggars. Giovanni Dominici stressed in his *Regola del governo di cura familiare*, that ‘vagabonds ... should not be ... charitably received’ and Archbishop Antoninus went so far as to warn that it was more of a sin to give aid to such people than a means to salvation.¹¹⁹ The urgent command to love one’s neighbour as oneself had been redefined and came to depend very much on who exactly that neighbour was. The promise of charity in *Quattrocento* Florence was therefore not quite as simple and all-embracing as it had been when Tino di Camaino created his sculpture in the first half of the fourteenth century.

Early humanist writers such as Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni, both of whom occupied the position of Chancellor of Florence during the late *Trecento* and early *Quattrocento*, viewed charity particularly as a concern of state rather than religion.¹²⁰ Bruni, in his work *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*, (1403) stressed that charity was the responsibility of the state as part of its duty to safeguard the common good: ‘The upper class is protected by its wealth, the lower class by the State.’¹²¹

¹¹⁷Antoninus, *Chronica*, 1543, bk.XII, ch.16, sec.2, cited in Trexler, 1983, 350.

¹¹⁸Bernardino of Siena, *Prediche volgari*, Siena 1427, 1936, 961, cited in Trexler, 1983, 351

¹¹⁹Giovanni Dominici, *Regola del governo di cura familiare*, 1927 ed., 23-24, cited in Henderson, 1994, 358.

¹²⁰Witt, 1983, 73-76, 343-345.

¹²¹Leonardi Bruni, *Panegyric to the City of Florence*, translation from Kohl and Witt, 1978, 173.

Later in the *Quattrocento* Matteo Palmieri wrote that those who cannot provide for themselves ‘deserve public subsidy’.¹²² Thus charity began to assume a more secular character, relating back to the state charity of Trajan and his successors and closer to the concept of Abundance as personified by Donatello: the embodiment of Florence.¹²³ For Coluccio Salutati, charity represented the very virtue which united the secular and religious, classical and Christian worlds and this concept is certainly reflected in Filippino Lippi’s fresco of *Charity* in Santa Maria Novella.¹²⁴

Filippino Lippi may have been influenced by Donatello’s *Dovizia* - inspired as it was by a combination of *Trecento* civic imagery, the Christian depiction of Charity and antique representations of state charity - when he painted his image of *Charity*. The general impression of the seeming multitude of children and drapery in Lippi’s fresco suggests abundance: an abundance of fertility, love and resource. The grisaille colouring used by Lippi to create his fictive architecture and plastic figures evokes more public sculptural figures of Charity, as well as Donatello’s figure of *Abundance*. As the language, both artistic and literary, which Lippi used in the decoration of the chapel, was classicised, Charity appears in a classical guise and is closely associated to her precursor, Abundance, although united with the Christian implications of the breastfeeding theme.¹²⁵

¹²²Matteo Palmieri, *Della vita civile*, 1825 ed., 191-192.

¹²³Henderson, 1994, 354-356.

¹²⁴Henderson, 1994, 355.

¹²⁵To the left of *Charity* a Greek inscription, ‘Parthenice’, is a dedication to the Virgin. R. Sale has pointed out that a poem dating to 1481 entitled *Parthenice*, by Giovanni Battista Mantovano made many connections between Mary and mythical pagan goddesses. Lippi’s use of the same Greek inscription in the Strozzi chapel demonstrates his desire to use pagan language and illustrate associations between Christian and antique figures, see Sale, 1979, 329-330.

Botticelli's drawing of *Abundance* in the British Museum, London, dating to around 1482, again illustrates this connection (fig.83). Botticelli's figure is classically dressed and is not dissimilar to Donatello's *Abundance* or Lippi's *Charity* and as well as being accompanied by a large cornucopia, several children are also included in the image.¹²⁶ Although the figure is not breastfeeding, the children evoke traditional depictions of Christian Charity in this drawing of a pagan personification.

Tension between antique, political and Christian understandings of charity, and its association with the female breast, can also be found in a famous example of fifteenth-century Sienese iconography. Two free-standing female figures originally placed on the end of each wing of the Fonte Gaia, designed and constructed by Jacopo della Quercia around 1410-1419 (now removed to the new civic museum of the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala, Siena) both attend to two small children, and one in particular refers to the suckling motif because the baby held in her arms touches her breast (fig.84).¹²⁷ These figures have never been satisfactorily identified. Although many documents survive concerning the commission, design and construction of the fountain and even an early design drawing, nothing exists which specifically states who these women are supposed to represent and the combined attributes of children and breasts complicate modern interpretation.¹²⁸

¹²⁶Lightbown, 1989, 296-297; Horne, 1980, 124-125.

¹²⁷Pope-Hennessy, 1996 4th ed., 1, 173-177, 268-269. The fountain was dismantled in the nineteenth century because of serious weather damage. It was replaced by Tito Sarrocchi who followed, as far as possible, the original programme of the fountain, although in many places he had to improvise because the ravages of time had completely eroded Jacopo della Quercia's work, see Hanson, 1963 for a thorough examination of the remains. See also Bisogni, 1975, 109-118; Bisogni, 1980, 13-17 and Beck, 1991, 1, 67-71, 81-94, 161-166.

¹²⁸For documents relating to the fountain see Hanson, 1963, 89-105 and Beck, 1991, 2, 345-395.

Some of the iconography found in the sculptural decoration of the fountain is likely to have been propagandist.¹²⁹ It is located on the *Campo*, which spreads before the governmental residence in Siena, the Palazzo Pubblico, and was commissioned at great expense, and eventually executed after many years of deliberation by the government, for the benefit of the Sienese citizens and the pride of the city. The relief panels which covered the inside of the fountain have been identified as depictions of Virgin and Child, a series of virtues and Angels and two Old Testament scenes, although the sculpture is so badly weather-damaged it is difficult to be certain about some of the panels.¹³⁰ The Virgin, of course, was a strong political presence in Siena since the dedication of the city to her on the eve of the Battle of Montaperti in 1260.¹³¹ Placed so prominently and in such close proximity to the Virgin, the defender of Siena, the two free-standing women appear almost like patron saints of the city and here, in the political centre of the city, probably held civic significance.

A fifteenth-century writer, Sigismondo Tizio, identified the figures as a double image of Acca Larentia, the foster-mother of the twins Romulus and Remus, and as he was writing very close to the time when the statue was erected his interpretation should be taken seriously.¹³² The twin boys were important figures in Siena: while Romulus founded Rome, the sons of Remus reputedly founded Siena and the wolf who fostered and suckled the boys was a prominent civic emblem which appeared repeatedly in politically significant art of the city.¹³³

¹²⁹Hanson, 1963, 19.

¹³⁰Hanson, 1963, 22-34; Beck, 1991, 1, 81-94, 161-166.

¹³¹See Norman, 1999, 3-4.

¹³²Hanson, 1963, 25; Beck, 1991, 1, 165.

¹³³Giovanni Pisano's marble *Wolf of Siena*, executed during the 1290s when he was



fig.84 Jacopo della Quercia, *Acca Larentia?* 1410-1419, Siena, Fonte Gaia, Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala.

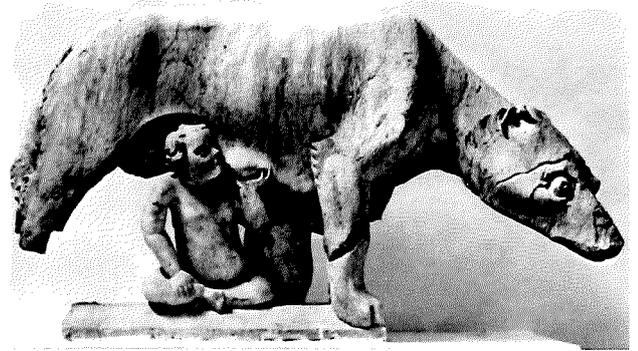


fig.85 Giovanni Pisano, *Wolf of Siena*, 1390s, Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.



fig.86 Jacopo della Quercia, drawing for the *Fonte Gaia*, c1408, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art.

Subsequent writers have tended to dismiss Tizio's interpretation of the fountain, however. In the eighteenth century the two figures were identified as double Charities, *amor Dei* and *amor proximi*; in the twentieth century the figures were given various identifications which included *Maternity* and *Mother Earth* and *Acca Larentia* and *Rhea Silvia*, the foster mother and the natural mother of Romulus and Remus.¹³⁴ This latter theory gained the most widespread acceptance.¹³⁵ In his 1991 monograph on Jacopo della Quercia, however, James Beck returns to the eighteenth-century interpretation of the two figures and argues that they represent Divine and Public Charity.¹³⁶

working on the facade of the Duomo of Siena, was installed on top of a pillar outside the Duomo (fig.85), see Ayrton, 1969, 217. Civic rivalry between the city states of North Italy in the late Middle Ages had driven many cities to discover or invent for themselves ancient origins which put them on a level with Rome and gave authority to their claims of greatness, see Benton in Norman, 1995, 2, 7-8. In effect the wolf came to represent the city of Siena, nourishing her dependants, protecting them and passing to them, via her milk, all the qualities they would need to be great leaders. Giovanni's sculpture of the wolf outside the Duomo had great political significance, evoking pride in Siennese citizens and representing a status symbol to outsiders. It is particularly relevant here, again because of the effective use of the suckling motif in political imagery and the merging identities of the nursing figure (albeit an animal in this case) and the city of Siena. William Levin has also pointed out that the she-wolf suckling the abandoned children represented an embodiment of Charity, a self-sacrificing and pious figure who would put the common good before herself, see Levin, 1983, 597.

¹³⁴See Bisogni, 1975, 109-118 and Beck, 1991, 1, 165-166 for a history of the literature identifying the female figures.

¹³⁵Hanson, 1963, 25.

¹³⁶Beck, 1991, 1, 91-94, 165-166. Beck relates his theory to an article by D. Pincus which argues that the two female figures standing on the Tomb of Doge Nicolò Tron (d.1473) in the Frari in Venice, by Antonio Rizzo, represent *amor proximi* and *amor Dei*, the two aspects of Charity, see Pincus, 1969, 247-256. Pincus connects the complete separation of the two aspects of Charity with the concept of the active and contemplative life, personified as two related but contrasting female figures by Michelangelo on the tomb for Julius II in San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome. Charity and Faith are similarly contrasted on Jacopo Sansovino's tomb for Doge Francesco Venier in San Salvatore, Venice in the mid sixteenth-century, and in this case

Beck bases his argument on the fact that the relief panel previously identified as representing the virtue Charity is actually too badly damaged to securely identify it. Beck believes this panel in fact represents Humility, a virtue included in the original design drawing of 1409, but apparently replaced by Wisdom when the scale of the fountain was enlarged some years later. Beck argues that both Humility and Wisdom were included in the relief virtue cycle which would have meant that Charity was not, therefore the two standing figures must combine to represent Charity, the mother of the virtues.

Although Beck's justification of his argument is questionable, the theory has much to recommend it; *amor Dei* encompasses the religious element of the iconography, in line with the sacred nature of the relief panels, while *amor proximi* communicates a civic message concerning the beneficence and the maternal attention to duty of the Sieneese government. The positioning of these figures on the fountain gives a clear analogy between continuous supply of milk from the breasts of a mother and the flowing of water from the fountain and in turn this links them to fourteenth-century depictions of breastfeeding Charity.¹³⁷

Charity is surrounded by children while Hope places her hand over her breast and raises her eyes towards heaven, Pincus, 1969, 253-254. But this division of the sacred and terrestrial worlds, the divine and the human, which resulted in these double personifications developed towards the end of the *Quattrocento* and into the *Cinquecento*, and applying the same theory to a work as early as Jacopo della Quercia's Fonte Gaia is perhaps risky.

¹³⁷Unless some hitherto lost document turns up to suggest that Charity was not included among the relief panels of the fountain, however, there is no way of identifying the most badly damaged panel which may well represent Charity. Although Humility was often included with the theological and cardinal virtues to give an even number, her replacement with Wisdom is entirely explicable in a Sieneese context: Ambrogio Lorenzetti had given that particular virtue emphasis in his fresco of *Good and Bad Government* in the Palazzo Pubblico, placing her above

Beck claims, however, that the two standing figures would be redundant if they did not represent Charity, but Acca Larentia and Rhea Silvia did have strong civic implications in Siena; as the women who gave life to and nourished Remus, the father of the men who founded the city, they were in a sense the mothers of Siena.¹³⁸ Furthermore, although Beck himself mentions that in the drawing of 1409 two wolves are included in the planned sculptural decoration of the fountain, he fails to take this into account when identifying the free-standing figures. (The left side of this drawing is in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, fig.86, and the right side is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London) The drawing does not clearly demonstrate how these animals were to be integrated into the Fonte Gaia and if they were ever executed they have long ago been lost. But this does not entirely obviate their importance in understanding the intention of the patrons of the fountain as they developed and directed the overall sculptural programme. Because of the fragmentary nature of the drawing only one wolf can be made out distinctly and it is obviously female because her teats, swollen with milk, are prominently depicted. This detail identifies the wolf as the civic emblem of Siena, the initial foster-mother of the abandoned twins Romulus and Remus, who suckled the babies before they were taken to the safety of the goat-herd's home and suckled by Acca Larentia. If the wolf of Siena was originally included in the plan for the fountain, it seems perfectly possible that the designers wanted to include in the sculptural programme of the fountain all the sources of nourishment which benefited the man who represented the origins of Siena and the city's antique heritage; those who gave milk from their breasts being particularly appropriate symbols on a public fountain.

the head of Justice on a level with the three theological virtues which hover above the head of Good Government.

¹³⁸Beck, 1991, 165.

The accent on the prestigious Roman origins of the city is further enhanced by Jacopo della Quercia's probable use of an antique sculpture of Venus as a model for the figure of Acca Larentia which, as a result, is more classical in style than the other sculpture on the fountain.¹³⁹ This statue, according to Ghiberti, had been found in the *Trecento* and erected on the old fountain in the *Campo*, although it was destroyed when it was thought to bring bad luck. Ghiberti claims to have seen a drawing of this statue made by Ambrogio Lorenzetti which Jacopo della Quercia may well also have had access to and used as a model. The pagan goddess of love could, therefore, have been adapted for use within a Christianised context specifically for a woman who lived during the pre-Christian period. As was the case with Donatello's *Abundance* and, later in the century, Lippi's Strozzi Chapel *Charity*, the pagan and Christian worlds are united and the bad luck which the original antique statue of Venus was perceived to bring to Siena was dispelled by the Christianised manifestation of Acca Larentia, endowed with all the Christian virtues, and bringing, through her charity and mercy, clean water to the people of Siena just as she had nourished Remus.

So extensive are the implications of the combination breast/child motif, and so fluid the boundaries between various maternal figures, that precise identification at this distance of time is very difficult. The influx of newly-legitimised subject matter, mined from the ever-expanding knowledge of classical literature during the course of the Renaissance, ensures that the interpretation of the breastfeeding motif becomes even more complicated. However, it would appear that the earliest identification of the figures by Sigismondo Tizio does appear to be the most valid.

¹³⁹Hanson, 1963, 33-34, Beck, 1991, 164; Pope-Hennessy, 1996 4rth ed., 1, 268.

There was no tradition in the first decades of the *Quattrocento* for splitting the two aspects of Charity into two completely separate women and no other examples of it until at least the sixteenth century.

Into the *Cinquecento*.

From the early *Quattrocento* on, the figure of Charity appears to have been pulled towards an antique and pagan manifestation on the one hand while on the other retaining her sacred nature aligned with the Virgin Mary. Raphael's depiction of Charity in a predella panel of an altarpiece of the *Entombment* (Rome, Museo Galleria Borghese), dating to 1507, veers towards the latter type, appropriate for a painting originally destined for the Baglioni family chapel in S. Francesco al Prato in Perugia, commissioned by Atlanta Baglioni, possibly in memory of her murdered son (fig.87).¹⁴⁰

This predella panel is made up of three sections with *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* in the middle of each, accompanied by two putti.¹⁴¹ It is painted in grisaille

¹⁴⁰Freyhan, 1948, 85; Cocke and de Vecchi, 1969, 97; Locher, 1994. For the commission of the altarpiece see Bruni, 1973; Luchs, 1983; Rosenberg, 1986, 175-187; Cooper, 2001.

¹⁴¹Raphael's *Charity* has been compared with the sculpted tondi of Michelangelo, in particular the *Pitti Madonna*, dating to c1504-05 (Florence, Bargello), and the tightly sculptural groups of St. Anne, Madonna and Child by Leonardo, and this strengthens connections between the personae of the Virgin and Charity, see Rubin, 1991, 43. Influences of both Michelangelo and Leonardo may have been Raphael's impulse for providing his *Charity* with so many children, thereby achieving a dense sculptural effect within the tondo frame. In what is presumed to be a preparatory drawing for the *Entombment* Charity (Vienna, Albertina), Raphael portrayed the left arm of Charity drawn back revealing the suckled breast which is being supported by her hand, see Wind, 1937-1938, 32; Dussler, 1971, 25; Joannides, 1983, 168; Rubin,



fig.87 Raphael, *Charity*, from the predella of the Baglioni *Entombment* altarpiece, 1507, Rome, Museo Galleria Borghese.



fig.88 Raphael, preparatory drawing for *Charity*, c1507, Vienna, Albertina.



fig.89 Luca Signorelli, *Charity*, c1499-1504, Orvieto, Cappella Nova.

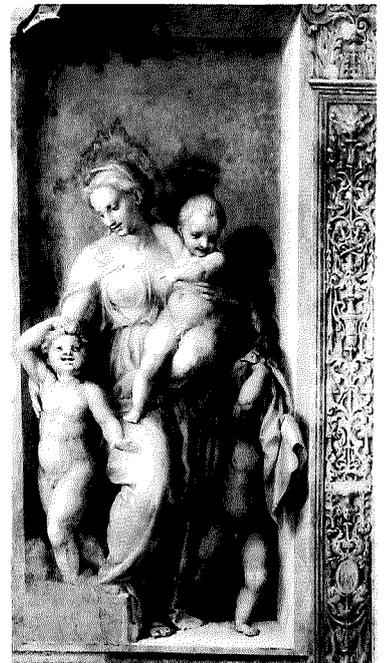


fig.90 Andrea del Sarto, *Charity*, c1513, Florence, Chioostro dello Scalzo.

which creates the illusion that the figures are sculptural. A *Charity* dating to c1499-1504, by Luca Signorelli in the Cappella Nova in the Duomo at Orvieto was evidently known by Raphael when he came to paint his version in Perugia (fig.89).¹⁴² Although Signorelli's *Charity* stands on a figure of vanquished Envy and suckles only one child, while Raphael's sits, turned to the left, with five children surrounding her, both versions include two putti holding respectively a flaming vase and a container of gold, representing *amor Dei* and *amor proximi*, on either side of Charity. Thus the divisions inherent in the concept of Charity are externalised in the two putti and an entirely unified Charity is represented by the breastfeeding woman demonstrating her all-encompassing abundant nature.¹⁴³

The politicised circumstances of the commission of the *Entombment*, which included the predella panel of the theological virtues, makes Raphael's depiction of Charity particularly interesting. The Baglioni family were involved in a long power struggle in Perugia and the grief of Atlanta Baglioni in losing her son in this struggle is mirrored by the Virgin's grief in the loss of Christ in the central image of the altarpiece. It therefore appears especially appropriate that the personification of Charity below unites love of God and love of man in the traditional maternal all-loving and all-giving image of a mother breastfeeding.

1991, 41-48 (fig.88). In his final painting, however, Raphael obscured this detail, shielding the breast with the arm which now wraps itself around the children on her knee. This slight softening of the iconography is typical of Raphael and perhaps indicates his sensitivity of expression, see Gilbert, 1986, 116.

¹⁴²Kanter and Henry, 2001, 199-205. Raphael used various aspects of the composition of Signorelli's roundel for earlier works, see Gilbert, 1986, 112-116.

¹⁴³Faith and Hope are also flanked by two putti but these do not have a distinct function as they do in the case of Charity, see Dussler, 1971, 24-25; Gilbert, 1986, 116.

Many paintings of Charity breastfeeding various numbers of children and with multiple associations were executed during the course of the *Cinquecento*. Andrea del Sarto, for instance, painted three versions, one for the Chiostro dello Scalzo in Florence c1513, which makes references to Filippino Lippi's version in Santa Maria Novella and to fifteenth-century depictions of Abundance (fig.90).¹⁴⁴ A recent work on Andrea del Sarto has drawn direct connections between the frescoed *Charity* in the Chiostro dello Scalzo and a fifteenth-century drawing of an antique figure holding a cornucopia (fig.91).¹⁴⁵ Once more what was, presumably, an antique personification of Abundance is intimately connected with the Christian persona of Charity.

Two later versions of Charity by Andrea, dating to 1517 (Paris, Louvre) and 1528 (Washington, National Gallery of Art) appear to relate more to contemporary paintings of *Maria lactans* and were both executed for the King of France (figs 92-93).¹⁴⁶ Indeed the Louvre Charity may have been painted in honour of the Queen who had recently delivered a son and heir.¹⁴⁷ Symbols of fertility and abundance appear in this painting in the form of fruit and flowers spread on the ground before

¹⁴⁴Freedberg, 1963, 42-43; Natali, 1998, 63-65.

¹⁴⁵Natali, 1998, 65.

¹⁴⁶Freedberg, 1963, 85-87, 165-166; Padovani, 1986, 39; Natali, 1998, 124, 178.

¹⁴⁷For the patron of the Louvre and Washington Charities see Freedberg, 1963, 86, 166. Sylvie Béguin has suggested that the Louvre painting is a celebration of the French Queen and her children, painted in 1518, not long after a Dauphin had been delivered, after some anxiety about the appearance of a male heir. Maternity, fecundity and ideal love are, therefore, a main strand of meaning in the painting, Béguin also points out that the French King, Francois I, was very interested in the arts and humanism and that the figure of the King was associated with various virtues, particularly Charity, in contemporary French literature, see Béguin, 1989, 3-22.



fig.91 Anon, Florentine, *Abundance*, late 15th century, 'Codex Escorialensis' f.48v, El Escorial, Biblioteca.

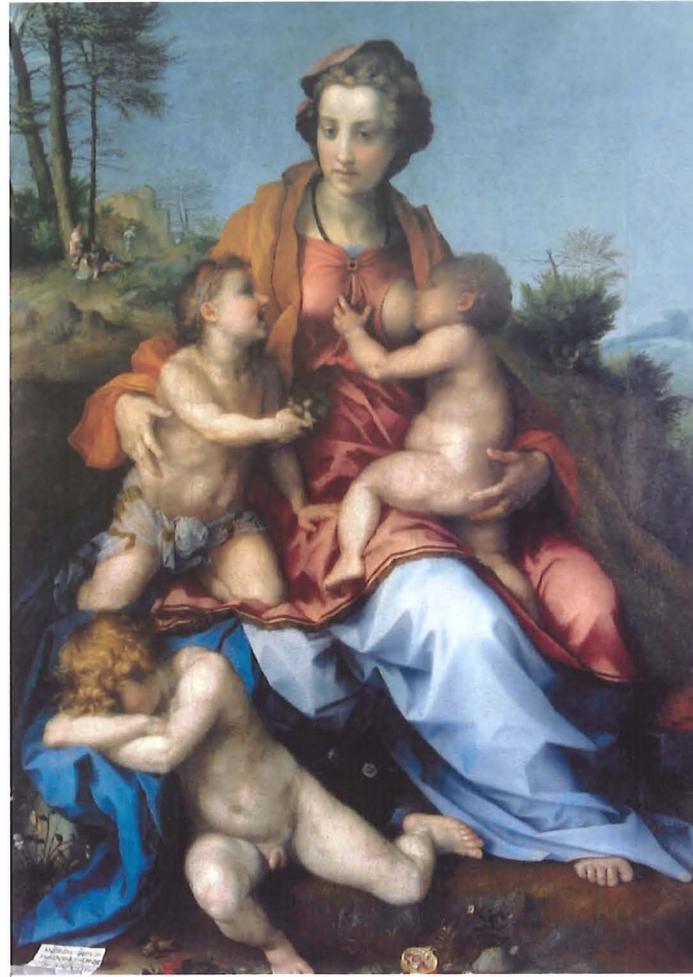


fig.92 Andrea del Sarto, *Charity*, c1517, Paris, Louvre.



fig.93 Andrea del Sarto, *Charity*, 1528, Washington, National Gallery.

the group. As the Virgin herself was celebrated for her fertility and abundance of love and, during the later *Quattrocento*, became viewed as the ultimate Christianisation and unification of pagan goddesses, images of Charity which emphasise traditional links with Mary could also include antique iconography. Although Mary may have been connected with pagan goddesses in literature of the time, she always retained her Christian manifestation in art, unlike Charity.

The cross references between the pagan and Christian worlds can also be seen in an example of Charity, probably by a close follower of Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, better known as Il Sodoma, dating to the first years of the *Cinquecento* (Munich, Hanfstaengl Collection fig.94).¹⁴⁸ This Charity unabashedly exposes her breasts, and the toga-like robe wrapped around her waist, her sandals and loose hair, are clearly *all'antica*. The painting is formally linked to a painting by Sodoma of Lucretia, the heroine of republican Rome, a female persona who became sexualised in art of the sixteenth century, particularly in paintings by Sodoma (fig.155).¹⁴⁹ However, the Charity is also close to a depiction by Sodoma of the Old Testament exemplar Judith, and all three may have been part of a series of paintings of illustrious Women.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, in the tree behind the Charity there nests a pelican, a Christian symbol normally associated with the self-sacrificial aspect of the Virgin Mary; the pelican reputedly pecked at its own breast to draw blood in order to nourish her young.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸Hayum, 1976, 269.

¹⁴⁹See below, Chapter Four.

¹⁵⁰See Haraszti-Takacs, 1978, 83-84.

¹⁵¹For the Pelican legend see Schiller, 1971-72, 1, note 53; 2, 40, 135, 136-137, 139, 148, 170, 195, 213. Even during the very early Renaissance *amor proximi* was identified in some instances by symbols of secular love and related to the figures of Venus and Amor, see Freyhan, 1948, 76-83. Robert Freyhan has further pointed out that the two women in Titian's painting *Sacred and Profane Love*, (Rome, Galleria



fig.94 Follower of Il Sodoma, *Charity*, 1508, Munich, Hanfstaengl Collection.



fig.97 Domenico Tintoretto, *Last Supper*, late 16th century, Lucca, Duomo.



fig.96 Veronese, *Fecundity*, 1550s-60s, Treviso, Maser, Villa Barbaro.



fig.95 Vasari, *Charity*, 1540s, Naples, Monteoliveto, S. Anna dei Lombardi.

The religious upheavals which gradually gained pace during the course of the *Cinquecento* inevitably had an effect on the iconography of the figure of Charity. During the Counter-Reformation years Charity continued to be depicted as a mother of small children, but, more often than not, in her most sacred guise as a theological virtue, her breasts were covered, and this corresponds with the waning popularity of *Maria lactans*.¹⁵² However, Charity, unlike Mary, could manifest in less strictly religious guises or even as the embodiment of *amor proximi* and suckle children. The move away from the humanisation of sacred figures, discussed in Chapter One, resulted, in the case of Charity, in a more definite split of the two aspects of her persona, *amor Dei* and *amor proximi*, often into two separate individuals. The figure representing love between men was naturally associated with more worldly matters and had an affinity with Charity's pagan forebears. It was thus this aspect of Charity which was most often represented engaged in the very human act of suckling a baby.¹⁵³

Borghese) dating to c1514, may represent the dual nature of Charity, *amor Dei* and *amor proximi*. The naked figure holds a flaming vase, the traditional symbol of love of God, and the ornately dressed woman leans on a box which holds something precious, possibly a reference to acts of charity, see Freyhan, 1948, 85-86. However, it is also argued that the painting was in fact commissioned to celebrate a wedding, and the silver casket represents a gift to the bride, see Goffen, 1997, 33-44. Although the love represented by the naked Venus, therefore, does relate to divine love, marital relations is the subject of the other figure and this is a long way from the meaning of Christian Charity. Despite this, there are clearly connections between all such dual definitions of love, particularly at a time when Venus was being associated with the Virgin as well as retaining her sexual nature.

¹⁵²See Mozzetti, 1998, for several examples of this.

¹⁵³See Pincus, 1969. For further sixteenth-century Charities see, for instance, Vasari's versions in the refectory of Monteoliveto, S. Anna dei Lombardi in Naples dating to the 1540s, and at his house in Arezzo and compare to his depictions of the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus, symbol of fecundity, at Arezzo and also his house in Florence, see Leone de Castris, 1981; Jacobs, 1984, 408-409 (fig.95). Compare also Veronese's allegory of Charity, who does not bare her breast, with his depiction

Counter-Reformation propaganda reaffirmed the Catholic doctrine that good deeds on earth could earn indulgences in heaven, a doctrine challenged by Protestant reformers, and this was reflected in many religious works of art. Tintoretto repeatedly included beggars in the front plane of his many paintings of the Last Supper as a reference to the charity of Christ in sacrificing himself in the form of the Eucharist, and also as a renewed urge to follow his example and perform acts of charity. In one example from very late in the sixteenth century now in the Duomo at Lucca, Tintoretto's son, Domenico, characterised one of these figures as a personification of Charity, once more breastfeeding (fig.97).¹⁵⁴ As a beggar, this figure is part of the human world and represents a figure in need of *amor proximi*. She does not really represent *amor Dei* in any sense and this is typical of the many instances of breastfeeding Charity found in the seventeenth century where the figure is placed in ordinary everyday genre scenes.¹⁵⁵

Roman Charity.

However, the breastfeeding motif did not entirely lose all its Christian implications during the Counter-Reformation years. In an altarpiece depicting the Seven acts of Mercy for the Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples, dating to 1606-1607, Caravaggio depicted a young woman breastfeeding a man through the

of Fecundity with multiple breasts, both in the opulent decoration of the Villa Barbaro at Maser, Treviso, dating to the 1550-60s, see Lewis, 1990; Prieuer, 2000, 64-75; Cocke, 2001, 9-14 (fig.96).

¹⁵⁴Pallucchini and Rossi, 1982, 1, 246. See Mozzetti, 1998, 53-80 for a discussion of the general revitalisation of the Christian figure of Charity in the Venetian area in the second-half of the sixteenth century.

¹⁵⁵See Rookmaaker, 1972, for a list of examples of Christian Charity in seventeenth century art.

bars of a prison window (fig.98).¹⁵⁶ This pagan iconography, identifiable as Roman Charity, encompasses two of the works of mercy; feeding the hungry and visiting the imprisoned. The resurgence of depictions of the seven acts of mercy, which had been so popular in the *Duecento* and *Trecento*, was again a response to the Protestant Reformation.¹⁵⁷

The figure group which comprises Roman Charity, consisting of a young woman nursing either her mother or father, dates back to ancient history and is of unclear origin.¹⁵⁸ The versions of the story most widely known during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance were from Valerius Maximus and Pliny.¹⁵⁹ ‘Fortune has no punishment and poverty no tatters that can debase and degrade filial tenderness’, Valerius states before going on to tell of a gentlewoman locked up and condemned to death. Her jailer takes pity on her and allows her daughter to visit, although he does not allow food in the hope that she will soon die. After several days she remains alive and healthy, however, and the jailer tries to find out why: ‘his curiosity led him to catch the daughter with her breast revealed, nursing the mother to alleviate the horrors of hunger’. The news of this wonder travels to the authorities and the woman is freed. ‘What is more extraordinary,’ Valerius demands, ‘more unheard of, than to see a mother nursed by her own daughter? It would seem to be against nature, if the first law of nature were not to love the author of our days’.

¹⁵⁶See Heisner, 1976; Pacelli, 1984; Tuck-Scala, 1993, 127-146 and Starobinski, 1997, 82-85.

¹⁵⁷Tuck-Scala, 1993, 129.

¹⁵⁸Deonna, 1954 and 1956; Braun, 1954, 356-362; Knauer, 1964, 9-23 and Seibert, ‘Caritas Romana’ in *Lexicon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, 1968-176, 1, 351.

¹⁵⁹Valerius Maximus, *Factorum*, 1989 ed., 5.4, 247; Pliny the elder, *Natural History*, 1940 Loeb ed., VII, 36.



fig.98 Caravaggio, *Seven Acts of Mercy*, 1606-07, Naples, Pio Monte della Misericordia.



fig.99 Ulm Bocaccio, *Roman Charity*, 1473, London, British Library, G.1449 Folio LXXXIXV.



fig.100 Miniature from Solinus manuscript, *Cimon and Pera*, 13th century, Milan, Ambrosiana.



fig.101 Giulio Romano, *Roman Charity*, drawing for ceiling panel in Sala degli Stucchi, Palazzo del Tè, Mantua, c1530, Chantilly, Musée Condé.



fig.102 Cesare Ripa, *Pietà de Figliuoli Verso il Padre*, from the *Iconologia*, 1630 ed.

In the *Trecento* Boccaccio included Valerius' story in his text *De Claris Mulieribus* and was similarly impressed by the tale: 'This filial devotion was not only holy but marvellous.'¹⁶⁰ Christine de Pizan also included the tale in her *Book of the City of Ladies* in the early years of the *Quattrocento*.¹⁶¹ In Italy of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, as in Roman times, a lot depended on family dynasty and duties of debt and loyalty to family members were of the utmost importance. Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* was a popular work well into the Renaissance and in 1473 the first printed version, the so-called Ulm Boccaccio, made its availability widespread. This printed edition included an illustration of the breastfeeding scene (fig.99). The two women, mother and daughter, are shown behind the bars of the prison window and both are dressed in the mode of pious Christian women of the fifteenth century. Similarly an illustration from a copy of Pliny's *Natural History*, dating to 1513, depicts the mother and her daughter.

It was not, however, until the sixteenth century that Roman Charity began to reappear in art on a regular basis and it was not, in fact, the mother and daughter version of the story which captured the imaginations of artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁶² Most commonly depicted during that period was the tale of Cimon and Pera, a similar story also told by Valerius but involving a father and daughter, which neither Pliny nor Boccaccio mention. Valerius Maximus's writings were printed between 1470-71 and again in 1502 and this is thought to have made

¹⁶⁰Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 1964 ed., 142-143.

¹⁶¹Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1982 ed., bk.2, 11, 1, 115-116.

¹⁶²Tuck-Scala, 1993, 133. See Pigler, 1956, 300-307 who lists over thirty depictions of Roman Charity from across Europe during the sixteenth century and around two hundred examples from the seventeenth century. See also Gachet, 1984 for a discussion on the later development of the iconography of Roman Charity

knowledge of the story of Cimon and Pera widespread across Europe and perhaps explains its appearance in art in the *Cinquecento*.¹⁶³

An early artistic depiction of the story is Giulio Romano's design for part of the ceiling decoration of the Sala degli Stucchi of the Palazzo del Tè, commissioned by Duke Federigo II Gonzaga of Mantua.¹⁶⁴ This drawing, dating to c1530, was reproduced, possibly by Giovanni Battista Mantovano, as one of twenty-five stucco relief panels which decorate the barrel-vaulted ceiling, the subjects of which are all drawn from classical mythology (fig.101).¹⁶⁵ Pera is dressed in the guise of Diana with a half moon head-dress and she suckles her father while squeezing her second breast with her left hand. An elision of various identities occurs: the reference to Diana, and the figure standing next to the father-and-daughter group holding a branch, suggests that the emphasis of meaning is on fertility (and also, perhaps, refers to the many-breasted figure of Diana of Ephesus), while the squeezing of the second breast is closely aligned to the gesture of the solitary female figure in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* which represents *Pietà de Figliuoli verso il Padre* (fig.102).¹⁶⁶

The general theme of the Sala degli Stucchi, which is thought to have been decorated in honour of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who visited Mantua in 1530 and 1532, is militaristic.¹⁶⁷ A frieze around the room depicts lines of Roman soldiers on their way to war; personifications of victories decorate the end walls;

¹⁶³Tuck-Scala, 1993, 133. The Cimon and Pera version of the Roman Charity story was, however, known by some during the Middle Ages. An illumination from a thirteenth-century manuscript by Solinus includes a depiction of a woman breastfeeding a man through the bars of a prison window (fig.100).

¹⁶⁴Tuck-Scala, 1993, 133; Hartt, 1981, 148.

¹⁶⁵Hartt, 1981, 149.

¹⁶⁶Okayama, 1992, 346.

¹⁶⁷Hartt, 1981, 147-150.

Mars appears in one lunette with his sword drawn, and the Emperor in his chariot, with all his attendants, face viewers as they enter the room.¹⁶⁸ The implications of Roman Charity within the general tone of the room can be readily understood. In the first place the reference to Diana is relevant, for she was goddess of the hunt and generally armed and combative. Secondly, the theme of filial duty is also important, for what else inspires the loyal followers of the Emperor, portrayed in all their vast legions in the frieze below, to go to war and to lay down their lives but feelings of duty and love to their country and their leader?

Giulio Romano is an artist who is now renowned for the strong erotic content of some of his work. He was commissioned by some of the wealthiest men of Northern Italy to decorate their sumptuous palaces with images which were pleasing to the eye, often particularly the male eye. The sensuality of the father and daughter group in his design of Roman Charity has naturally aroused some suspicion in modern historians.¹⁶⁹ As Marilyn Yalom states, not entirely accurately: ‘The original story of Filial Charity tells of a daughter nursing her mother in prison. The renaissance interpretation of this story changed the parent to a father, thus introducing a heterosexual incestual note.’¹⁷⁰

It is, in fact, more likely that the reason why the Cimon and Pera story was the preferred version of late renaissance and baroque artists was that filial duty was

¹⁶⁸Hartt, 1981, 148-149.

¹⁶⁹Tuck-Scala declares that Giulio’s Pera ‘...renounces her chastity and proffers her breast to the elderly Cimon...’, 1993, 133.

¹⁷⁰Yalom, 1997, 26. In fact the irregularity of a scene which depicted a daughter breastfeeding her father was questioned right back to classical times, but the most amazing aspect of the scenario was the very fact that it was considered to be against nature and yet was a sign of exemplary love, unquestionably a good action, see Levin, 1983, 604.

most appropriately expressed through the juxtaposition of a female and a male. While women had little or no legal standing and could not take part in the political world, the father was head of the household, holder of the purse-strings and could take a place in government. He was also the most appropriate substitute for the head of the country, be that Duke, Monarch or Emperor. Although Giulio Romano's *Roman Charity* may not have overt political content, it was commissioned by a wealthy, powerful man and is part of the decoration of a palace designed to act as status symbol, and of a room which celebrated the patronage of the Duke by the Holy Roman Emperor.

Further, despite the secularised nature of sixteenth-century depictions of Roman Charity there remained a link with Christianity; both with the virtue Charity as she was personified from 1321, the nursing mother dispensing love, and with *Maria lactans*, particularly in examples where the Virgin gives drops of her milk to adult male devotees such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Mary, after all, simultaneously nursed her own son and her God when she breastfed Jesus Christ. The primary emphasis of the lactating breast in these contexts was love and mercy. That this continued to be true, even in the case of Roman Charity, as late as the early seventeenth century, tends to be confirmed by the fact that Caravaggio chose to use the figure-group of Roman Charity in his depiction of the seven acts of Mercy in the altarpiece for the Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples. This altarpiece, despite the inclusion of what may be interpreted as an erotic image, was so valued by the governors of the Church that they vowed never to sell it, limited copies made of the painting, and it remains today on the altar for which it was commissioned.¹⁷¹ It

¹⁷¹Tuck-Scala, 1993, 137.

seems almost as if Charity has returned to her roots in this painting by Caravaggio, despite her paganised manifestation.

Conclusion.

Paintings of the Christian virtue Charity personified as a suckling mother continued to appear in art, both Protestant and Catholic, in the post-renaissance centuries.¹⁷² The breastfeeding motif, however, was also adapted for many types of secular art, even portraiture, during these years.¹⁷³ For a personification of a Christian virtue there was not as much perceived danger, as there apparently was in the case of the Virgin Mary, in depicting her with breasts exposed to suckle. The Virgin had a reputation to protect which was under threat during the Reformation years. She therefore had to retreat and assume unimpeachable dignity. For the Mother of the Christian Virtues this was not entirely the case, part of Charity's meaning was very much to do with human affairs and she could assume political and even pagan identities without endangering her reputation. Who could question the nature of love when it was symbolised by the love between mother and baby? Even if the Protestants rejected the Catholic tradition of giving indulgences for good works, they could not deny the ultimate positive power of merciful love.

The exposure of breasts in Christian art, even when sexuality had become a subject for secular art, was excused because breastfeeding traditionally had little sexual connotation through its association with food, nourishment and unconditional

¹⁷²See Rookmaaker, 1972.

¹⁷³See Wind, 1937-1938.

love. Despite this, breastfeeding did, in the *Cinquecento*, become more associated with the human world rather than the divine.

The breastfeeding motif in late mediaeval and renaissance art, with all its associations of love, rebirth, fertility and abundance, was an extremely positive symbol. In the next chapter it will be examined how this was true even where it was adapted for very different images: paintings which depict the mutilation of the female breast.



fig.103 Anon, *St Agatha*, 12th century, Monreale, Duomo.

Chapter Three: The Mutilated Breast.

Chapters One and Two of this thesis have both focused on images which depict breastfeeding in one form or another and whatever the various meanings of these images they are essentially positive and nurturing and cannot be described as horrifying, gruesome or even offensive. This third chapter will consider manifestations of breast iconography of a very different nature. Depictions of male and female saints, dating to the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, often include details of the martyrdom of the saint in question. Many of these images make for uncomfortable viewing, but in particular, representations of female virgin martyrs who suffered breast mutilation as part of their torture can be extremely graphic.

Portrayals of breast mutilation typically show a woman tied to a post, at the mercy of several male torturers who have stripped her naked and are proceeding to violently attack her exposed, and often bleeding, breasts with various instruments, while being watched by varying numbers of men. The frequency, in artistic (and literary) representations dating to the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, of the depiction of such a gender-specific torture has drawn some interest from modern writers.¹ In this case, in particular, it is all too easy to arbitrarily impose modern frameworks but, as always, this is a misguided approach to art which was produced several hundred years ago. That such a consummate symbol of womanhood as the female breast was regularly depicted and viewed as the object of torture is not without significance, but to view these images largely as evidence of a viciously misogynistic society would be naive. The sheer horror of the images and the

¹See in particular, Easton, 1994, 83-109.

apparently straightforward import of a scene in which males are attacking what is assumed to be a sexual part of the female body, is hard to ignore today.

Nevertheless, it is necessary at least to attempt to reconstruct the wider contexts of the production of the paintings before making pronouncements about the information, intended or unintended, which an image communicates across the centuries.

To understand to any extent why these images were painted and how people of the late Middle Ages, in all their complex multiplicity, reacted to paintings of women having their breasts cut off, it must first be considered what the breast signified in art of the time and also what the concepts of torture and pain denoted to contemporary viewers. Did the breast have any explicit sexual connotations in these images? What was the association between this particular type of breast iconography and other types such as the lactating breast? And one must also ask whether the representation of torture would have elicited the overwhelmingly negative emotional reaction it generally does today.

Of course the answers to these questions are hard to establish. Only a partial reconstruction of context, through the combined analysis of historical circumstances and interpretation of primary sources, can give answers, and even these are loaded with preconditions. Too heavy a reliance on contextual evidence can lead to flawed interpretations, because any 'context' is constantly changing across time and space.² The vast and constantly shifting range of personal reactions to art combined with the impossibility of completely eradicating modern bias makes it necessary to constantly qualify analysis of images, particularly those which evoke strong emotion.

²Bryson, 1992, 18-42.

Historical Sources.

Breast torture was a regular feature of the treatment of early Christian female martyrs as their stories were recorded by the Christian Fathers.³ Indeed, it would be virtually impossible to give a complete list of the saints who are documented or illustrated suffering this torture. In the first place sources, consisting of collected martyrologies and *passiones*, date back as far as the fifth century and are numerous and varying in detail. In the second place, breast torture can consist merely of the exposure of a female's breasts, as enforced nakedness was an element of the humiliation of virgin martyrs. Consequently, when it came to illustrating the stories it was often unavoidable to include the exposed breasts. Specific mention of breast torture in the literary sources was not necessary for breasts to appear in the iconography. So prominent a feature of female anatomy are the breasts that they are going to be affected by many different forms of torture; the raking of the body with combs, or iron hooks, whipping, rolling over live coals, all will involve damage to the upper torso where the breasts are located.

In addition, although the original people who died during persecution in the early centuries of Christianity undoubtedly suffered unique experiences of torture, the process of turning their individual stories into legend, for the main purpose of promoting Christian belief, has ensured that the stories tend to follow similar

³See the *Analecta Bollandiana*, a centuries-long investigation into the isolation of verifiable information about lives of the early saints. Any individual saint can be found in the periodic indexes. See also Delehaye, 1933; Tibbets Schulenburg, 1990, 285-309, for a discussion of the history and intended function of collections of saints' lives and Head, 2000, 169-177, which briefly examines the initial collection of and subsequent development of martyrologies.

formulae. Thus the female virgin martyrs, whatever tortures they suffered, can all now be viewed as aspects of the same woman - the ideal Christian woman.

There are however, a few saints with whom the actual cutting off of a breast is particularly associated: in Italy these include St. Christine of Bolsena, St. Julitta, St. Reparata and St. Catherine of Alexandria.⁴ In these cases the stories do not focus particularly on the breast torture episode, which is just one of a catalogue of brutalities inflicted on their bodies. In the case of St. Agatha, however, the breast mutilation is the focus of both literary and visual narrations.⁵

The cult of St Agatha was widespread during the early Middle Ages but verifiable information about her history is not extensive.⁶ Her story is narrated in the *Acts of the Martyrs*, compiled in the second half of the fifth century. However, these

⁴ For St. Christine see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 385-387; Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1982 ed., bk.3, 10, 1; *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 4, 330-338; for artistic images see Kaftal, 1978, (*North East Italy*), 207-212. For St. Julitta see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 323-324; *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 5, 1324-1328; for artistic images see Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 866. For St. Reparata see *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 9, 123-128; for artistic images see Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 881. According to the *Golden Legend*, and Christine de Pizan, it was not actually St. Catherine of Alexandria who had her breasts torn off, but her persecutor, the Emperor Maxentius' Queen. The Queen was converted to Christianity by Catherine and suffered torture and death when she revealed her faith to her husband. Subsequently he had Catherine beheaded and instead of blood, milk ran from her body, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 334-341; Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1982 ed., bk.3, 3, 2. The episode of breast mutilation appears in several painted life cycles of St. Catherine, see Kaftal, 1978, (*North East Italy*), 87-202 and 1965, (*Central and South Italy*), 255-267.

⁵Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 154-157; for artistic images see Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 3-8; 1965, (*Central and South Italian Painting*), 5-14; 1978 (*The Painting of North East Italy*), 3-12.

⁶For information on the early sources of Agatha's history see Frere, 1930, 94-95; Kennedy, 1963, 175-179; Carrasco, 1985, 19-32; *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* 1990, 1, 319-335.

texts are not greatly reliable. The three oldest versions of her life (two in Greek and one in Latin) are all evidently a paraphrase of a now lost original and are similar in composition.⁷

In most versions of her life story Catania is given as the city of St. Agatha's birth.⁸ There is also general agreement that she was martyred during the reign of Decius, on the 5th of February 251.⁹ She allegedly came from a rich and noble family and was still very young when she took a vow of perpetual virginity. Her persecution started when the Roman Emperor sent out a dictate against Christianity and the governor of Sicily, Quintianus, fell in love with her because of her great beauty. Knowing that she was a Christian, he had her arrested and sent her to a brothel so that her virtue would be destroyed and she would therefore be more likely to give in to his advances. She continued to keep her virtue intact however, and subsequently refused to worship pagan idols. Faced with such a tenacious spirit, Quintianus ordered that she be tortured and when she still did not renounce Christianity instructed his men to twist and cut off her breast. This act of mutilation was duly carried out, but, when she was once more imprisoned, during the night St. Peter appeared to her and healed the mutilation. Further torture followed but when an earthquake threatened to destroy Catania the populace, believing it was due to the mistreatment of Agatha, protested and the disaster was miraculously averted. Agatha continued to pray throughout these events and soon after died a martyr. A year later,

⁷*Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 1, 319.

⁸It has also been suggested that Palermo was Agatha's birthplace but there is no definite evidence one way or the other, see *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 1, 320 and *AASS: IV Februarii*, 1863, I, 599-662.

⁹Again this is not entirely certain - both the *De virginitate*, by Aldhelm and Bede's martyrology give the date of her death at the beginning of the fourth century, during the persecution of Diocletian, see *Aldhelm; The Prose works*, 1979, 107-108 and 'Bede's Martyrology' Lifshitz trans., in Head, 2000, 181.

on the anniversary of her death, Mount Etna threatened to erupt and engulf the city of Catania: again miraculously, the catastrophe was stemmed by a crowd of Agatha's followers, who placed her veil in the path of the lava.

This story appears in various very similar versions dating to the early Middle Ages. St. Jerome's martyrology makes the earliest surviving references to her and she also appears in the Roman, Ambrosian and Ravenna canons of the Mass.¹⁰ Many churches were built in her honour; as early as 593, St. Gregory the Great rededicated an antique basilica in Rome to Ss. Agatha and Sebastian, and donated relics pertaining to both saints.¹¹ Subsequently, around 725, Gregory II also dedicated a church, erected close to his own papal palace, to St. Agatha.¹²

This papal endorsement of her cult ensured that its popularity became even more widespread. Agatha became a protector not only against volcanic eruption, but against fire of any type; and the bells which would be rung in warning of danger were often inscribed with an epitaph which allegedly was originally on her tomb in Catania.¹³ Perhaps because of this, or because of some strange association between the shape of bells, volcanoes and breasts, she became patron saint of bell-makers. She is also patron of bakers, again, possibly because of a confusion between the shape of bread and breasts. Images of St. Agatha which were carried in procession as part of her cult, and which included the saint holding a dish containing her breasts, apparently led to this confusion and resulted in the ceremonial blessing of bread on

¹⁰In the early Middle Ages she also appeared in the *Synaxarion*, a Greek collection of Saints' lives; Venantius Fortunatus's *Carmina* and in the Gelasian and Gregorian *Sacramentaries*, see *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 1, 324.

¹¹*Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 324; Cartocci, 1993, 611-620.

¹²*Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 325.

¹³*Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 326.

her feast day.¹⁴ She is also invoked against diseases of the breast and is the patron saint of nurses.¹⁵ Surprisingly, perhaps, there is no modern scholarly study of Agatha's cult, its geographical spread or images connected with the cult.

Artistic and Literary History

Agatha appeared occasionally in early manuscript illuminations, illustrating the various religious texts where her name appeared, and also in decoration on the walls of churches (fig.103).¹⁶ But before 1200 these images did not, for the most part, include scenes of breast mutilation. Agatha is represented iconically, usually richly dressed, carrying a cross, a diadem, the palm and crown of the martyr and/or her veil, and is often identified by an inscription.¹⁷ The earliest known examples where narrative scenes illustrate the torture of her breasts can be found in the Byzantine *Menologium of Basil II*, (Biblioteca Vaticana, Rome, fig.104) and a French *passio* illustrating the lives of the saints (Paris, Bibl. Nat., MS lat. 5594, fig.105), both dating to around the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹⁸ These depictions of breast torture appear to be unusual at this date, however. Although the first may indicate an extinct Byzantine tradition, and the *passio* may reflect early

¹⁴Butler, 1956, 1, 256; Cheney, 1996, 6.

¹⁵Roeder, 1955, 72; Metford, 1983, 18; Cheney, 1996, 6.

¹⁶See for instance the twelfth century mosaic decoration in the cathedral in Monreale and a procession of female martyrs on the walls of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, also includes an iconic figure of St. Agatha. In manuscripts she can be found decorating the initial I in the late eighth century Gellone Sacrementary and around the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries she appears in a lectionary from St.-Martial, Limoges, see Carrasco, 1985, 24. For a full discussion of the development of Agatha's iconography see Rohault de Fleury, 1894, 1-78; Squarr, 'Agatha von Catania' in *Lexicon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, 1968-76, 1, 44-48.

¹⁷Carrasco, 1985, 24; *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 1, 327.

¹⁸For the *Menologium of Basil* see der Nersessian, 1940-41, 104-125; for the *passio* see Carrasco, 1985, *passim*.



fig.104 Byzantine *Menologium of Basil II*, *Torture and Imprisonment of St. Agatha*, 10th-11th century, Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana.

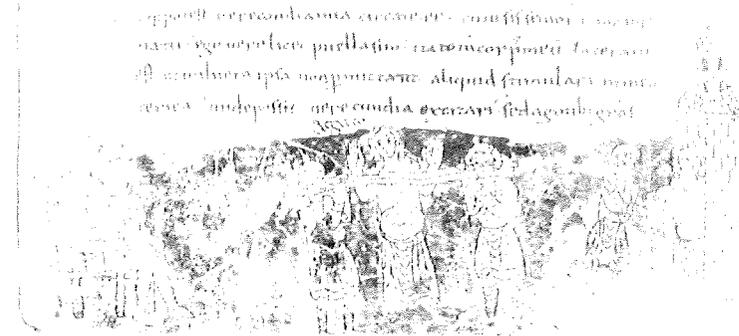


fig.105 French *passio*, *Removal of St. Agatha's Breast*, 10-11th century, Paris, Bibl. Nat., MS lat. 5594.



fig.106 Master of the Carmine, *St. Agatha*, 13th century, Florence, Museo dell'Opera dell Duomo.



fig.107 Pamplona Bible, *Torture of St. Agatha*, 13th century, Cod.I.2.4.15, fol. 247v., Augsburg, Universitätsbibliothek.

Christian iconography in martyrologies, there is no surviving evidence to corroborate such theories and the main inspiration for these depictions of breast torture could simply be the actual texts themselves.¹⁹

In the later Middle Ages, however, Agatha's story was expanded with much detail in literary accounts of her life and this coincided with many incidences of artistic illustrations of Agatha's breast torture.²⁰ The earliest known post-1200 cycle of her life story produced in the West is in the Spanish *Pamplona Bible* (fig.107).²¹ The illustration of the torture scene is quite gruesome: Agatha, before Quintianus, has already had one breast cut off and the bloody amputated flesh lies by her while her torturer cuts off her second breast with a large pair of shears.

Crude and simplistic though the illustration of torture in *The Pamplona Bible* is, the image does contain the basic elements of the vast majority of portrayals of the martyrdom of St. Agatha produced across Europe over the following three hundred years and more. Most cycles of the life of St Agatha produced in Italy during this period in manuscripts, frescoes and on the predella panels of altarpieces, include an

¹⁹Apparently, Gregory the Great ordered that the church which he dedicated to Agatha, S. Agata dei Goti, (which had previously been a fifth century Arian basilica) to be decorated with scenes from her life in mosaic and fresco but unfortunately none of these survive and it is unknown if a scene of breast mutilation was included; if there did exist such a precedent, obviously it would have been artistically influential. Carrasco, 1985, 24, 27; Cheney, 1996, 3 and note 5. For a discussion of the possible Byzantine tradition of cycles of saints' lives see der Nersessian, in Weitzmann, 1955, 222-231.

²⁰Iconic images of St. Agatha continued to be produced, however, see fig.106. This painting, which dates to the early thirteenth century, was used in processions on Agatha's feast day in Florence until at least the late eighteenth century and was kept in the Duomo, on or near the *altare della Croce*, where the relic of Agatha's veil was also kept, see Offner, 1993, 1, 1, 700-704. And for a later copy, painted on the rear of the panel, see Offner, 1984, 3, 9, 305.

²¹Bucher, 1970, 2, 530-532.

episode where one or more torturers apply instruments to her breast(s).²² When she appears in a single manuscript illumination, in groups of saints represented as if in heaven or in a timeless contemplative *sacra conversazione* on the main panel of an altarpiece, or in the later Renaissance as a single figure, her identifying attributes are her severed breasts, usually on a plate, or the instruments of the forced mastectomy.

Thus the focus of her life story, as illustrated in art from the fourteenth century on, is the torture inflicted on her breast, despite the fact that she also suffered on the rack and was rolled naked over potsherds and live coals, and in addition spectacularly averted an earthquake and stemmed the flow of lava from a volcano.²³ But these scenes, although important elements of the cult of St. Agatha and included variously in life cycles, gradually became less important in artistic representations and the breast mutilation episode became central. Indeed, in the sixteenth century, that one episode was isolated and used as subject matter for single-image paintings.

Evidently, the motif was found to be particularly resonant, but why? Is it valid to label it ‘religious pornography’ as one modern writer has done?²⁴ Historical evidence has been used over the last thirty years or so, in cases too numerous to list,

²²My, by no means exhaustive, collection of images of Agatha has been gathered from various sources. These include the collected volumes of Kaftal, 1952, 1965, 1978, 1985 and Fremantle, 1975, 378, 393, 395, 411. Other examples were gathered from the Warburg Institute Photograph collection and various articles on Agatha all of which are referenced in this chapter. In Offner’s *Corpus of Florentine of Florentine Painting* further examples can be found; 1984, 3, 4, 305, (does not include breast iconography); 1997, 4, 7 (part 2), 354; 2000, 4, 8, 367, (not illustrated). For more examples, not all illustrated, see Rohault de Fleury, 1894, 1-78; Pigler, 1956, 1, 405-408 and Squarr, ‘Agatha von Catania’ in *Lexicon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, 1968-76, 1, 44-48.

²³Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 155-156.

²⁴Miles, 1992, 156.

to show that from as far back at least as Classical Greece and until very recently the female half of humanity has been subjugated and exploited. During the late mediaeval and renaissance periods, when these images of breast mutilation were produced, women were viewed by their male counterparts, in many senses, with varying degrees of suspicion and fear. But does the endemic male prejudice against the female sex necessarily prove that images of breast torture were primarily symptomatic of the misogynistic society which produced them? Can these images be interpreted as demonstrating widespread condonement of, or even a desire to view, the infliction of sexual violence on women?

Margaret Miles, in her book *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, devotes barely a page to imagery of female saints suffering breast mutilation, which, considering the title of her work, appears strange.²⁵ However, it is clear from the fact that this subject is included in the chapter entitled 'Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque' as well as the anachronistic definition of pornography with which she categorises the images, that she feels the import of such depictions of women suffering breast torture at the hands of males needs no further investigation or explanation.

Elsewhere in her book, Miles claims that in contrast to the lives of female saints, in the lives of saintly men there is little mention of stripping because it was not so shameful for men.²⁶ A brief examination of the extensive volumes of the *Corpus of Florentine Painting*, however, which covers the period when the cults of the saints were at their height, suggests that during that period, in the Florentine area

²⁵Miles, 1992, 156.

²⁶Miles, 1992, 56-57 and Martha Easton agrees with her see Easton, 1994, 83-109, 97.

at least (one of the most productive and innovative as far as art was concerned), very few images of naked saints of either sex were painted.²⁷ And on the whole, male martyrs such as Ss. Sebastian, Bartholomew and Lawrence appeared suffering their own particular gruesome tortures at least as often if not more often than female saints (figs 108-110).²⁸ The same conclusion may be drawn from a summary of George Kaftal's volumes of *The Iconography of the Saints*, which is less extensive but covers the whole of Italy. In any case, it is unrealistic to argue that there were few visual or literary depictions of males stripped and tortured, when the most ubiquitous image evoked in any form throughout the Middle Ages was of a more or less naked man suffering horrendous torture: Christ crucified.

²⁷In fact, in the *Golden Legend* the stripping of female virgin martyrs is not always mentioned and when it is it is never dwelt on to any extent. For instance, there is no mention of nudity in the stories of Ss. Lucy or Apollonia, despite the fact that their tortures are described, see Jacobus de Voragine, 1993 ed., 1, 29; 268. Furthermore, on several occasions the stripping of male martyrs is mentioned, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., *The Life of St. Secundus*, 1, 226; *St. Lawrence*, 2, 66; *St. Dionysius*, 2, 236-241. And in the *Life of St. Hippolytus*, it is made clear that stripping was as much an element of the torture for males as it was for females: Hippolytus declares 'You haven't stripped me, rather you've clothed me.' and his tormentor replies 'How can you be so stupid, not even blushing at your nakedness.', Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 75.

²⁸For the life of St. Sebastian, who was tied to a post and shot full of arrows, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 97-101; for artistic images see Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 917-926; 1978, (*The Painting of North East Italy*) 909-920. Suggestions have been made by several historians that there may be homosexual implications in the images of St. Sebastian's martyrdom, see for instance, Hollander, 1993, 182. For the life of St. Bartholomew, who was flayed alive, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 109-116; for artistic images see Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 137-142; 1978, (*The Painting of North East Italy*), 109-122. For the life of St. Lawrence, who was tied to an iron grill over burning coals, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 63-74; for artistic images see Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 613-624; 1978, (*The Painting of North East Italy*) 587-597.

In a more extensive study of images of breast torture, Martha Easton, in her article 'St. Agatha and the Sanctification of Sexual Violence', argues that historians who consider only the theological symbolism of such images and deny the sexual import, are focusing only on the image and are not taking into account the viewer's gaze.²⁹ She states that these images of naked females are necessarily erotic despite the fact that they were produced in a religious context. She suggests that mediaeval response to these images may have been, in the first instance, the same as modern response because their visual effect is 'sensual, sadistic, voyeuristic and violent ...'³⁰ And in fact she assumes that this is what would have been the primary reaction to the image of most mediaeval males, although she concedes that 'For some mediaeval male viewers respect and esteem for St. Agatha and her suffering probably vied with an interest in her body and the sadistic, voyeuristic potential of her torture scene.'³¹

At one point in her article, Easton does note briefly that:

'... the image of a bare-breasted saint need not have only erotic connotations. Certainly even in the twentieth century the breast is a multivalent symbol of motherhood, fertility, and femininity as well as sexuality. In the Middle Ages the breast also signified food.'³²

However, she continues to almost entirely ignore the implications of this assertion and fails to consider whether sexuality or food and motherhood were most associated with breast iconography in the period in which the images she is referring

²⁹Easton, 1994.

³⁰Easton, 1994, 85.

³¹Easton, 1994, 98.

³²Easton, 1994, 93.

to were produced. Furthermore, Easton does not attempt to investigate how the concepts of pain and torture were interpreted during the late Middle Ages and whether they would have stimulated entirely similar reactions in the mediaeval viewer as they might in the modern.

The crucial point in Easton's argument, and the implication of Miles', is that females enduring breast torture are suffering torture which is not only gender-specific but also essentially sexualised because the breasts are visual sexual signifiers to males, and this is what betrays the misogynistic and sadistic element of the paintings. Although neither author truly establishes whether or not the breast would have triggered an essentially sexual response in any or every mediaeval person, this baseline supposition appears to have been accepted by many. In her recent study of the breast in history, Marilyn Yalom writes off the images of saints suffering breast torture with the comment 'Pictorial narratives of female martyrdom, whatever their didactic intent, afforded some artists the opportunity to vent their sadistic impulses on women's breasts.'³³

There is no doubt that breast torture is gender-specific. Women have breasts and men do not.³⁴ And it is clear that there is at least some sexual element in the story of Agatha's torture simply because her enforced nakedness was part of the torture of virgin martyrs who all set great store by remaining chaste. But this was true of all virgin martyrs, no matter what the details of the actual torture applied to their bodies and it was also true of male martyrs to some extent.³⁵

³³Yalom, 1997, 36. See also Ashton, 2000, 151.

³⁴Gender borders were not always, however, clear-cut in the late mediaeval period, as will be discussed later in the chapter.

³⁵See for instance the *vita* of St. Christopher in the *Golden Legend*: two young women are sent to seduce him when he is imprisoned, but instead of losing celibacy



fig.108 Master of the Rinuccini Chapel, *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, late 14th century, Florence, S. Donato in Polverosa.



fig.109 Giovanni dal Ponte, *Skinning of St. Bartholomew*, late 14th century, Florence, S. Trinita.

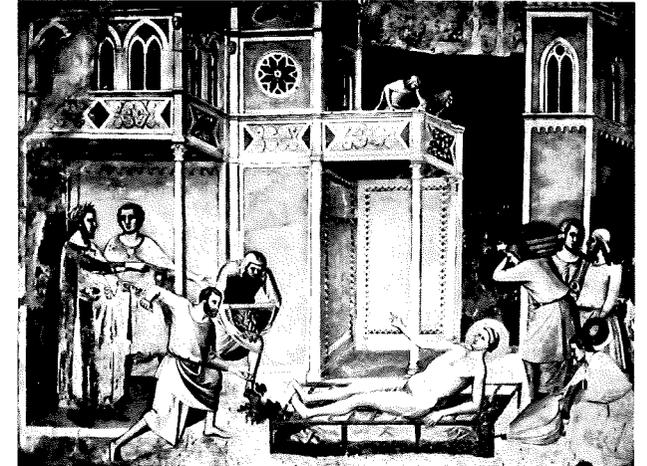


fig.110 Bernardo Daddi, *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, early 14th century, Florence, S. Croce.



fig.111 Illustration from the *Legenda aurea*, HM 3027, *The Torture of St. Felicula*, 1270-80, San Marino, California, Huntington Library, fol. 64v.



fig.112 Illustration from the *Legenda aurea*, HM 3027, *The Torture of St. Agatha*, 1270-80, San Marino, California, Huntington Library, fol. 33r.

Consider, for instance, a manuscript of 1270-80 of the *Legenda aurea*, in the Huntington Library (HM 3027) which includes an illustration of *The Torture of St. Felicula* (fol. 64v. fig.111).³⁶ The saint is hung from a wooden structure so that she can be raked by combs. She is stripped naked to the waist, with breasts clearly indicated, pressed downwards by the rope from which she is suspended underneath the arms.³⁷

A relatively little known saint, Felicula receives barely six lines in the actual text of the *Golden Legend*.³⁸ She does not warrant a legend of her own and instead appears at the end of the story of St. Petronilla, in itself a very short tale. St. Petronilla, the legend states, was the daughter of St. Peter, who kept her in a state of fever because of her great beauty, presumably to ensure that she would not be led astray sexually or be the cause of immodest sexual thoughts in another. Notwithstanding, she managed to attract the attention of a Count, Flaccus, who asked her to marry him. She deceived him into thinking she accepted by asking him to send to her maidens who would accompany her to his house. In the meantime she resorted to such a regime of fasting and prayer that she took to her bed and died before any wedding could take place. It is at this point that Felicula makes an appearance: as Petronilla's foster sister, to whom Count Flaccus turns on hearing the news of Petronilla's death, and gives an ultimatum: either to marry him or to

he manages to convert them, Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 13. St. Bernard also defended his virginity, Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 99.

³⁶See Easton, 2002, 49-64. In this article Easton examines what she deems to be the exaggerated use of graphic violence adopted by the illustrator in this manuscript.

³⁷Easton, 2002, 50.

³⁸Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 315; *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 5, 612-613.

sacrifice to the idols. Felicula promptly refuses to do either and so Flaccus ‘... kept her in jail for seven days without food or drink and then tortured her on the rack, put her to death and put her body in the sewer.’³⁹ Saint Nicodemus recovered and buried her body and in his turn was martyred as punishment.

In the Huntington Library manuscript we see illustrated, on the left, the death of St. Petronilla, the main protagonist of the tale, and on the right the torture of St. Felicula, an area of the story on which the writer does not dwell. There is very little to distinguish between the two female characters, indeed, if one did not read the story it would be easy to think they were both the same character. Clearly St. Petronilla’s death, which involved a withdrawal to bed, was not a very dramatic image for the illustrator who was evidently keen to make the text as visually exciting as he could. Thus, although Felicula plays a relatively minor role in the story, she at least was tortured before she died and so was able to provide the thrilling aspect of the illustration.⁴⁰

But why are Felicula’s breasts so prominent in the illumination when there is no mention of them in the text? If one is going to torture someone, male or female, part of the mental torture is to make the victim feel as vulnerable as possible. Human beings are at their most vulnerable when naked and this was particularly true for virgin martyrs. Furthermore, the breasts of a woman are prominent parts of the human body and are also close to the head, which necessarily must be depicted. It is almost unavoidable to depict them when representing a woman even partially naked

³⁹Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 315.

⁴⁰See fig.112 for the illustration of Agatha’s torture from the same manuscript, which does not appear to be outstandingly graphic compared to other contemporary examples of the scene.

during torture. This simple fact answers in some part the question of why so many images of breast mutilation were produced during the Middle Ages. By their very prominence breasts invite torture - in some respects the fact that they are a purely female feature of the human body is merely coincidence - the breasts are there so they are tortured.⁴¹

If breasts were included in late mediaeval scenes of torture simply for purposes of gender differentiation, then there is no reason to set images of breast torture apart from those of other brutalisations of the human body, as explicitly demonstrating a particularly aggressive element in the attitudes of males to females. Yet this is not the full story, of course, because breasts did have specific connotations that other parts of the body did not have when they appeared in art. But these connotations were not primarily focused on the sexual aspect of the female breast. How did the associations of love, food, comfort and even female power affect the reading of images of Agatha undergoing breast torture? While not disregarding the general misogyny which pervaded the societies which produced these images of breast torture and the consequent possible underlying negative interpretations of the images, this is an important question which must be considered when trying to establish how contemporary viewers would have reacted to these scenes of breast mutilation.

⁴¹Although breast mutilation is undisputedly a gender-specific torture, the blurring of gender borders, which was an element of late mediaeval theology, made it possible for a man to suffer this torture. Presumably influenced by the many stories and images of female saints suffering torture to the breasts, an illustration of the execution of Peter Stumpf in Johann Negel's *Warhafftige und wunderbarliche Newe Zeitung* of 1589, shows the saint suffering the shearing of the breasts, see Oates, 1989, 1, 304-363.

Cultural/Religious and Literary Context.

Texts such as Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, written in the late thirteenth century, catered for increasing curiosity about the details of saints' lives and provided source-material for artistic images. They were no more historically accurate than the much older martyrologies on which they were based, indeed they were heavily embroidered to provide the kind of specific details of stories which tended to be lacking in earlier accounts, and this would have made them particularly useful for artists who painted narrative scenes.⁴²

The popularity of the *Golden Legend* in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance is demonstrated by the very large number of surviving manuscripts.⁴³ It was translated, adapted and added to extensively and was the source for many of the other collections of legends compiled over several centuries following its first appearance.⁴⁴ Its influence cannot therefore be overstated. Although many other mediaeval martyrologies did exist, (for instance the *Abbreviatio in gestis et miraculis sanctorum*, attributed to Jean de Mailly and the *Epilogus in gesta sanctorum* by Bartholomew of Trent, both written in the thirteenth century prior to the *Golden Legend*) copies of the *Golden Legend* outnumbered these works by around forty to one.⁴⁵

⁴²For a detailed examination of mediaeval martyrologies see Delehay, 1998.

⁴³Reames, 1985, 3.

⁴⁴Reames, 1985, 4. An English example of a fifteenth-century collection of saints lives, translated mainly from the *Golden Legend*, is Osbern Bokenham's *Legends of Holy Women*, see the translation by Delany, 1992.

⁴⁵Reames, 1985, 198. For Jean de Mailly see Dondaine, *Le Dominicain Français Jean de Mailly et la Légende Doree*, 1946, and for Bartholomew of Trent see 'L'epilogus in gesta sanctorum de Barthelemy de Trenta' in *Studia mediaevalia et mariologica*, 1971, 333-360.

Written as a source-book for clerics, the translation of the *Golden Legend* into the vernacular of various languages ensured that it was not just the clergy who were familiar with the stories.⁴⁶ Based on texts which were several hundred years old and which themselves had been intended not only to record and celebrate the sacrifices of many early Christians but also to give instruction on the values and way of life expected of Christians, mediaeval martyrologies were similarly utilised to summarise and communicate the Church's doctrine. In that respect all the stories in the *Golden Legend* tend towards stereotypicality and similar themes and leitmotifs are found throughout.⁴⁷ This is particularly true of the legends of female saints. Although there were far fewer female saints than male they did play a distinct role, particularly virgin martyrs such as Agatha.⁴⁸

The focus on Agatha's mastectomy in visual images dating to the late Middle Ages, is thus partially explained by the story in the literary sources, in particular the *Golden Legend*, which emphasises the beauty and virginity of the heroine and her refusal to worship pagan idols, but which also focuses a great deal on the symbolism of the breast. It reports Agatha's response to having her breast cut off:

'Impious, cruel, brutal tyrant, are you not ashamed to cut off from a

⁴⁶Reames, 1985, 86.

⁴⁷This is not to say that there is no kernel of truth in many of the stories; many early Christians were persecuted and killed. But stories recorded originally from eyewitness accounts and hearsay and repeated through centuries are subject to change, especially those that are manipulated for specific purposes. See Delehay, 1998, 12-39 for a discussion on the production of a legend. Also Reames, 1985, *passim*, for an examination of the historical debate on the merits and demerits of the *Golden Legend*.

⁴⁸Abou-El-Haj, 1994, 27. For comparative figures of the numbers of female and male saints throughout Christian history see King, 1991, 130.

woman that which your mother suckled you with? In my soul I have breasts untouched and unashamed with which I nourish all my senses, having consecrated them to the Lord from infancy.⁴⁹

There is no reference in this statement to the breast's sexual character. In the first instance Agatha's response to the loss of her breast is an attempt to recall to her attacker his mother, her sacrifice for him and the close bond breastfeeding helps to establish between mother and child. Agatha, like Quintianus' mother, is a woman and, although she has no intention of mothering children, her breasts should be treated with some reverence because of their nurturing potential.

As discussed in the first chapter, breastfeeding was a sign of the altruistic love a mother has for her child. It could also be used to symbolise the debt and duty a child, when once an adult, should feel towards his mother and the power a mother possessed. St. Catherine of Siena used this association when writing to admonish her brother for his failure to visit their mother: '... Oh, ingratitude! Have you not considered the sorrow of her labour, nor the milk that she drew from her breast ... over you?'⁵⁰ One of the most powerful meanings the image of a breast could evoke was the sanctity of motherhood, and this is one of the most important aspects of the symbol of the breast as it is used in the legend of Agatha in Voragine's *Golden Legend*.

In the second instance, the breast is used, in the above quotation from the *Golden Legend*, as a symbol of spiritual nourishment. This relates to theological ideas surrounding breastmilk, again discussed in previous chapters. The implication

⁴⁹Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 155.

⁵⁰St. Catherine of Siena, *Selected Letters of Catherine Benincasa*, 1906, 30.

is that, as far as Agatha is concerned, the loss of her physical breasts makes no difference to her faith.⁵¹ She has within her still all the elements of which the external breast is only a symbol: the ability to love altruistically and the ability to spiritually nourish, neither her heart nor her soul is affected by the torture. The alignment of Agatha with the Virgin Mary, both as a potential mother and as a spiritual conduit, tends to preclude the possibility of interpreting the breast symbolism found in images of her torture as primarily erotic. Like the Virgin, Agatha suffered for the Christian faith and like the Virgin, one of the sites of that suffering was her breasts.

However, Agatha's female sexuality is a main factor in the story, it is after all her beauty which attracts Quintianus and causes her to be tortured in the first place. The torture renders her unattractive: when St. Peter comes to heal her breasts and says 'I am a Christian so you need not be ashamed', she replies, 'How could I be ashamed, since you are so old and a grandfather and I am so mangled that no one could possibly desire me.'⁵² But Agatha does not imply here that it is because she has lost her breasts specifically that she is now unattractive, but because she is 'mangled'. Gaping wounds, wherever they are situated on the body, tend to repel.

Agatha is initially unwilling to allow St. Peter to restore her to her former state of beauty, but when it is revealed that he has been sent by Christ she allows him

⁵¹Elsewhere in the *Golden Legend*, Jacobus tells the story of St. Sophia and her three daughters Faith, Hope and Charity who all suffered torture and martyrdom. Of particular note in this story is the fact that Faith suffered the severing of her breasts. Thus the leitmotiv of breast torture is explicitly associated with the Christian virtue Faith. Faith exists in the heart and neither are affected by the loss of the outer symbol of the heart, the breast, Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 185.

⁵²Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 155.

to heal her, but not because it is important for her to be sexually attractive. Agatha's breasts are restored to her by St. Peter in order to return her to her perfect state created by God, which, the Christian faith expounds, will happen to all Christians who are to enter heaven on the Day of Judgement.⁵³ Agatha, as a martyr, does not have to wait for the Day of Judgement to be by Christ's side.

This lack of emphasis on erotic meaning in the torture of the breasts, however, is confused by the more general emphasis on sexuality which is found throughout the legends of female saints. Agatha's story, as told in *The Golden Legend*, conforms to the general format of narrative for virgin martyrs.⁵⁴ The vast majority of early female saints recorded in the *Legend* are described as being very beautiful, they take a vow of chastity as part of their Christian faith, and are desired by a pagan figure of authority who tries and fails to corrupt them sexually. The continually stressed message is that their heroism is centred on the defence of their virginity.⁵⁵ Proportionally a tiny minority of married women became saints at any time in Christian history and those who did usually forswore marital relations and became celibate.⁵⁶ Indeed, for Christians of both sexes from the time of the early

⁵³Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 155-156. See Bynum, 1995. The scene of St. Peter healing the wound was another popular image which focused on the breast injury: in earlier manuscripts the scenes of torture and healing were often combined while later in the Renaissance the healing constituted an important separate image in itself, see fig.104.

⁵⁴Abou-El-Haj, 1994, 34.

⁵⁵Twenty-three of the twenty-four female saints whose lives are narrated in the *Golden Legend* defend their virginity and twelve die in the process. See Heffernan, 1988, 283, for a discussion of the use of the motif of breast mutilation in mediaeval English texts. He argues that it symbolically represents the transformation from virgin/child, to bride of Christ to Mother of God. The removal of the breasts represents the martyrs' continuing virginity throughout the transformations.

⁵⁶Atkinson, 1982, 131-143.

Christian martyrs throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, spirituality and sexuality were not deemed compatible.⁵⁷

This last point leads into a very complex area of Christian history: issues surrounding the human body. The human body is particularly important to Christians because of the promise of its being resurrected on Judgement Day, and the burial sites of early Christian martyr saints were foci for the cults of the saints, as were relics of their bodies.⁵⁸ It was believed that the dead person, although in heaven, was simultaneously present in the remains and could act as mediator between heaven and earth, God and man.⁵⁹ This stems, of course, from the emphasis placed on the physical body by Christ himself at the Last Supper which had led to the Eucharistic ceremony and the doctrine of transubstantiation, whereby the actual body and blood of Christ were consumed during communion.⁶⁰

However there was another aspect of Christian belief which despised the physical body for its tendency towards sins of the flesh and which attempted to subdue its natural inclinations. Because the main and in many cases only role available for women of the mediaeval period, dating back to early Christianity, was

⁵⁷See Clark, 1986, 38 for a discussion on the reasons why Christians who wished to be deemed holy avoided sexual activity. See also Tibbets Schulenburg, 1986, 29-72.

⁵⁸See Bynum, 1995 and also 1991, 222-238 for a summary of the mediaeval debate about the nature of the body and its relation to the soul with which it will be reunited on Judgement day.

⁵⁹See Baxandall, 1972, 40-45; Ringbom, 1984, 22-23; Belting, 1990, 41-64. These studies examine in depth the function of and empathic reaction towards images in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. For further information on the operation of saints' cults during the period, see Brown, 1981; Bell and Weinstein, 1982 and Abou-El-Haj, 1994, this is a very select list, there are many works on the subject of saints.

⁶⁰See Rubin 1991 *passim*, Snoek, 1995, *passim*.

that of marriage and reproduction, both of which necessitated sexual contact, there was a general belief that women were tied to nature more than men, and they were more likely to succumb to the base sin of sex.⁶¹ The Church Father Tertullian, for instance, asked of women: ‘And do you not know that you are ... Eve?... You are the devil’s gateway ...’⁶² This relation to Eve and her responsibility for the fall of man underlines that it was women’s weakness that necessitated the need for sex in the first place, and is reflected by the fact that the main heroism of women saints was generally in keeping their virginity intact.⁶³

Thus literary stories and in turn artistic images of virgin martyrs such as Agatha were intended as exempla in a very straightforward sense, communicating the simple message that chastity must be preserved at all costs. This message was directed in the first instance at nuns and other religious women, (practically speaking, the religious life was the only alternative to marriage available to women of the time); in the second instance, however, the message was aimed at women in general.⁶⁴ In Italy of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance the chastity of laywomen was an extremely pertinent matter because marriage amongst the wealthy merchant families of the prosperous cities was a political issue. Daughters were vital in the forging of ties between the most powerful families.⁶⁵ Chasteness before marriage and fidelity after was a requirement, as stated by the sixteenth-century writer Baldassare Castiglione ‘... so that we could be certain of our own children.’⁶⁶

⁶¹Gries, 1978, 9, 37; Dubruck, 1989, 3; King, 1991, 155; Bynum, 1991, 202.

⁶²Tertullian, ‘On the Apparel of Women’ in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1994, 4, 14.

⁶³Bynum, 1991, in particular chapter six, ‘The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages’, 181-238.

⁶⁴See Tibbets Schulenburg, 1990, 307-308.

⁶⁵King, 1991, 31.

⁶⁶Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 1967 ed., 195.

The loss of honour which resulted in the loss of a daughter's chastity (or a wife's fidelity) could spell ruin for an entire family.⁶⁷

Therefore, partly as a result of the portrayal of virgin martyrs, in literary and artistic representations, as women who would suffer any physical torment in order to defend their chastity, devoutly religious women of the Middle Ages did many very strange things to their bodies. In a collection of the teachings of Catherine of Genoa, a devout Italian woman of the fifteenth century, it is described how she ate very little and flavoured what she did eat with bitter herbs; she also slept on thorns and forced herself to eat the lice and suck the pus from the wounds of the poor and sick people she attended.⁶⁸ The mortification of the flesh, through such means as the wearing of barbed belts next to the skin, self-starvation and self-mutilation routinely practised by devout women of the time can, in one sense, be interpreted as an attempt to subjugate the flesh.⁶⁹ But, although Christian attitudes to the body reflected a hate and fear of the sin the body could lead the mind into, another aspect was the belief that the suffering of the body could bring devout believers closer to Christ through identification with his suffering. St. Catherine of Siena, who ultimately starved herself to death at the age of thirty-three, asserted that if the soul could:

‘attain to virtue and escape Hell and have eternal life, without sufferings, and have in the world consolations spiritual and temporal, it would not wish them; but it desires rather to suffer, enduring even unto death, than to have

⁶⁷King, 1991, 29.

⁶⁸Catherine of Genoa, *The Spiritual Dialogue*, 1979 ed., 120, 131.

⁶⁹Much has been written about this in recent years, see in particular Kieckhefer, 1984; Bell, 1985; Tibbets Schulenburg, 1986; Bynum, 1987 and 1991, 181-238; King, 1991, 117-130; Mazzoni, 1996.

eternal life in any other way: only let it conform itself with Christ crucified, and clothe it with His shames and pains.'⁷⁰

Indeed, the religiosity of women, and in particular holy women, of the late Middle Ages centred very much on their bodies because one of the main benefits of fasting and self-harming was that, in some cases in a very physical sense, through hallucinations, visions and trances, they came closer to Christ through the imitation of his suffering.⁷¹ This was true of men as well as women: Thomas of Celano tells us in his first life of St. Francis of Assisi that the saint would not give up his holy work, even though very ill, because 'he had not yet filled up in his flesh what was lacking of the suffering of Christ, though he bore the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ on his body'.⁷² But the many miracles recorded during exulted spiritual trances induced by physical self-harm tended to be performed by women.⁷³ These miracles were often centred on the physical body, specifically the female body: phantom pregnancies and spontaneous lactation, for instance, were common responses to hallucinations concerning the Christ Child.⁷⁴

⁷⁰Catherine of Siena, *Selected Letters of Catherine Benincasa*, 1906, 42-43.

⁷¹Bynum, 1991, 184. Imitation of Christ was given official endorsement and encouraged through the production of literary works such as *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, in the fourteenth century, which characterised Christ in a far more human context than had previously been the case, enabling readers to empathise with him to a far greater extent. See *Meditations*, 1961 ed.

⁷²Thomas of Celano, 'The First Life of St. Francis of Assisi by Thomas of Celano', in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1991, 312.

⁷³Bynum, 1991, 186-188.

⁷⁴Bynum, 1991, 187. This was mirrored in several stories of the lives of female martyrs - for instance, milk instead of blood flowed when St. Christine suffered the cutting off of her breasts, just as milk was the bodily fluid which flowed when St. Catherine of Alexandria had her head cut off. See note 4.

The emphasis on the physical female body and the possibilities it held for spiritual expression, which increased dramatically in the later Middle Ages, perhaps explains in part the upsurge in contemporary graphic artistic representations of the sufferings of female Christian martyrs.⁷⁵ The stories of saints such as Agatha were viewed as a further inducement to experience pain and torment in the journey towards higher spirituality. It is reported by Bonaventura that St. Francis,

‘In the fervour of his love ... felt inspired to imitate the glorious victory of the martyrs ... longed to offer himself as a living victim to God by the sword of martyrdom: in this way he would repay Christ for his love in dying for us and inspire others to love God.’⁷⁶

This tradition of *imitatio Christi* dates back to the earliest period of Christianity, when St. Paul advised that Christians should ‘Imitate me as I imitate Christ’.⁷⁷ Altruistic suffering for others in the form of martyrdom, as exemplified by Christ, was emphasised by many early Christian writers.⁷⁸ The motif of a naked and mutilated body was used to shock and starkly illustrate the difference between the new faith of Christianity, where suffering was welcomed, and the old regime of barbaric pagans who would stoop so low as to do this to the human body. Although death by martyrdom had mainly vanished by the later Middle Ages, the ideal of imitating Christ and his martyr saints remained a central tenet of the faith. The church authorities encouraged imitation of saints’ lives, and the visual narrations

⁷⁵Bynum, 1991, 186.

⁷⁶Bonaventura, ‘Major Life of St. Francis by Bonaventura’, in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1991, 701.

⁷⁷Paul 1 Corinthians 11, 1

⁷⁸See Heffernan, 1988, 216-222.

were often paralleled with the life of Christ in order to give authenticity to the holiness of the saint involved and also as an inducement to imitation.⁷⁹

In many of the images of St Agatha suffering torture dating to the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries an obvious link is being drawn with various images of Christ's suffering. Agatha is bound with arms above or behind her in a composition very similar to traditional depictions of Christ during his flagellation, his mocking and, in particular, his crucifixion. An example of this can be found in a cycle of Agatha's life painted on the rear of a late thirteenth-century altarpiece in the church of S. Agata in Cremona (fig.113).⁸⁰ Agatha hangs with her arms above her in a Y shape, recalling many depictions of the Crucifixion from this date (fig.114).⁸¹ The positioning of Agatha's body, with her hips swung to the left, echoes the depiction of Christ on contemporary wooden crucifixes such as Cimabues's of c.1280 in Santa Croce (fig.115).⁸² Again, in an illustration from the fourteenth-century Psalter of Saint Elizabeth, now in the Museo Archeologico, Cividale, (Ms.CXXXVII fol.2r) Agatha hangs from a wooden structure which suggests the cross on which Christ hung (fig.116).⁸³ The position of her legs and feet, one crossed over the other, imitates the positioning of Christ's feet as they began to be shown in art from the end of the *Duecento*, nailed together, not separately as previously (fig.117).

⁷⁹Abou-El-Haj, 1994, 26, 34-35; Easton, 1994, 94-97.

⁸⁰Salmi, 1927-28, 49-60; Pasi, 1988, 351-359; Goi, 1998.

⁸¹For additional examples of Agatha posed in crucifixion-like compositions, see also Kaftal, 1978, (*North East Italy*), 6-12 and Dütschke, 1989, 2, 590-594.

⁸²See Bellosi, 1998, 30-32, 97-102, for discussion of the development of Crucifixion iconography in thirteenth-century Italy.

⁸³Santangelo, 1936, 149-155.



fig.113 Anon., *Torture of St. Agatha*, 13-14th century, Cremona, S. Agata.



fig.114 Taddeo di Bartolo, *Crucifixion*, early 14th century, Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo.

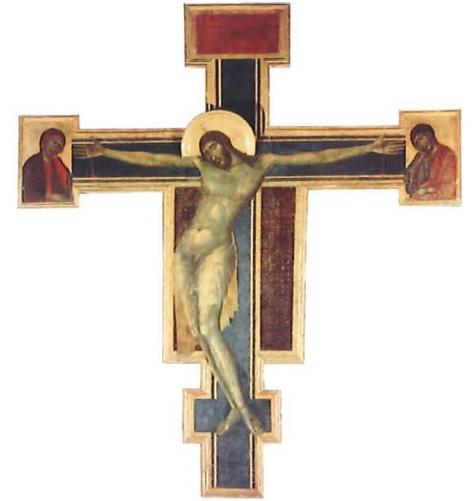


fig.115 Cimabue, *Crucifix*, c1280, Florence, Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce.



fig.116 Psalter of Saint Elizabeth, *Torture of St. Agatha*, 14th century, Cividale, Museo Archeologico, Ms. CXXXVII, fol.2r.

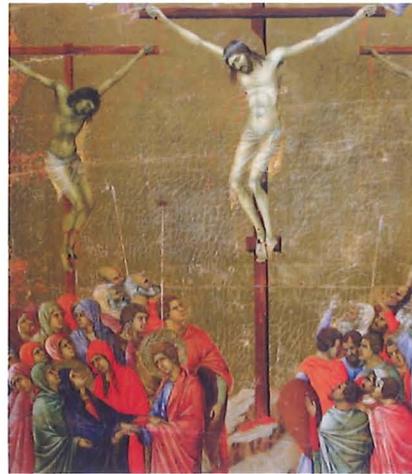


fig.117 Duccio, *Crucifixion*, from the back of the *Maestà*, 1308-11, Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.



fig.118 Florentine School, *Torture of St. Agatha*, 14th century, Florence, Academy, No.437.

A *Trecento* predella panel of the torture of St. Agatha (Florence Academy, no.437), adapts the composition found in contemporary Flagellation scenes (fig.118).⁸⁴ Agatha is tied to a single post with her arms above her head while her torturers appear to be using iron hooks to inflict injury. One raises his weapon in his hand as if he were brandishing a whip in a manner very similar to the composition of Cimabue's *Flagellation of Christ* in the Frick collection, New York (fig.119).⁸⁵ This format is again used in a Sicilian predella panel in S. Agata, Castoreale, depicting Agatha's torture, dating to 1420 (fig.120).⁸⁶

Other instances are set in architectural backgrounds, with the Roman Governor seated on a throne, recalling depictions of episodes from Christ's Passion such as Christ before Caiaphas and Pilate, as for instance on the back of Duccio's *Maestà* (fig121). Both a manuscript initial illumination by Sano di Pietro, now in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art, and a fourteenth-century fresco in S. Agata, Valdarno demonstrate this (figs 122-123).⁸⁷ In both of these, Agatha's approaching martyrdom is indicated by a crown, reminding viewers that her reward for such suffering will be her immediate place in heaven by Christ's side.

In all these examples Agatha is typically portrayed with one or two tormentors who apply to her breasts various instruments of torture, which may be compared with the spear which pierced Christ's side and the stick with a sponge of vinegar offered to him. In addition, the wound which the removed breast leaves is

⁸⁴Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 7.

⁸⁵Bellosi, 1998, 117-118.

⁸⁶Kaftal, 1965, (*Central and South Italian Painting*), 10.

⁸⁷For fig.122 see Christianson, Kanter and Brandon Strehlke, 1988, 158 and for fig.123 see Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 5-6.

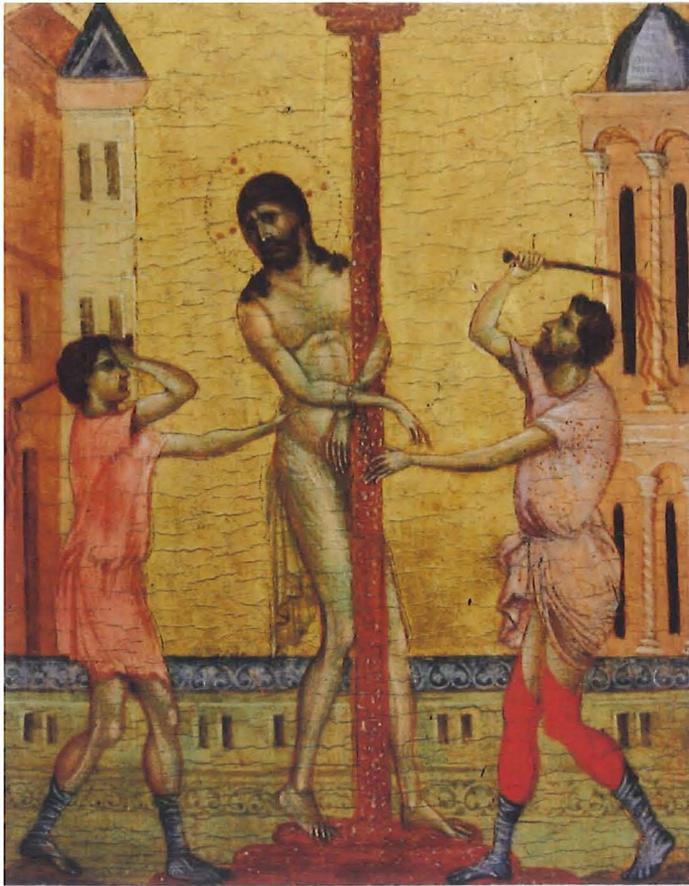


fig.119 Cimabue, *The Flagellation*, 14th century New York, Frick Collection.



fig.120 Anon, *Torture of St. Agatha*, c1420, Castoreale, S. Agata.



fig.122 Sano di Pietro, manuscript initial illumination, *Torture of St. Agatha*, 15th century, New



fig.121 Duccio, *Christ before Pilate*, from the back of the *Maestà*, 1308-11, Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.



fig.123 Anon, *Torture of St. Agatha*, 14th century, Valdarno, S. Agata.

reminiscent of Christ's side wound.⁸⁸ This recalls links made between Mary's breast and Christ's wound, as discussed in Chapter One.

The link between Agatha and Christ is strengthened by her appearance in *sacre conversazioni* holding a plate on which her severed breasts lie (figs 124-125).⁸⁹ In several instances Agatha appears in a line-up of saints on the main panel of an altarpiece and just below her on the predella is an isolated scene of the torture of her breasts (figs 126-127).⁹⁰ The offering of Agatha's sacrificed flesh identifies her body once more with the body of Jesus Christ and has Eucharistic connotations. Consider, for instance, her depiction in the polyptych of Sant'Antonio, from the workshop of Piero della Francesca dating to 1460-70 (fig.128).⁹¹ Located in the right tondo of the upper predella, Agatha stands against a dark background holding up her two breasts on a plate. The breasts appear undamaged, all blood and the gruesome aspects of a torture scene are absent, yet she would have been instantly recognisable to any educated and most uneducated viewers.

The close proximity of Agatha's naked breasts to the exposed flesh of the Christ child in the central panel of the Sant'Antonio polyptych implies a simple message. Christ's flesh was to be mutilated and sacrificed for the sake of all mankind and this would be remembered every time the ritual of the Eucharist was carried out. Agatha's flesh was also sacrificed in the name of Christ and in defence of His faith.

⁸⁸Bynum, 1991, 185.

⁸⁹Fremantle, 1975, 378, 393.

⁹⁰Fremantle, 1975, 395, 411.

⁹¹Garibaldi, 1993, 34-36; Laskowski, 1998, 99.



fig.124 Lorenzo di Niccolo, *Coronation of the Virgin with Saints, including St. Agatha*, 14-15th century, Private Collection.



fig.125 Lorenzo Monaco, *Madonna and Child with Saints, including St. Agatha*, 14-15th century, Prato, Galleria Comunale.



fig.126 Lorenzo di Niccolo, *Madonna and Child with Saints, including St. Agatha and Predella Scene of her Torture*. 14-15th century, Venice, Cini Collection.



fig.127 Lorenzo di Bicci, *Madonna and Child with Saints including St. Agatha and Predella Scene of her Torture*, 14-15th century, Empoli, Museo della Collegiata.



fig.128 Piero della Francesca (workshop), *St. Agatha*, detail from the *Perugia Altarpiece*, (Sant' Antonio) 1460-70, Perugia, Gallery.



fig.129 Macrino d'Alba, *Ss. Francis, Agatha and a Donor*, 15th century, Vienna, Albertina.



fig.130 Giovanni Bartolo, *Bust of St Agatha*, Catania, Duomo.

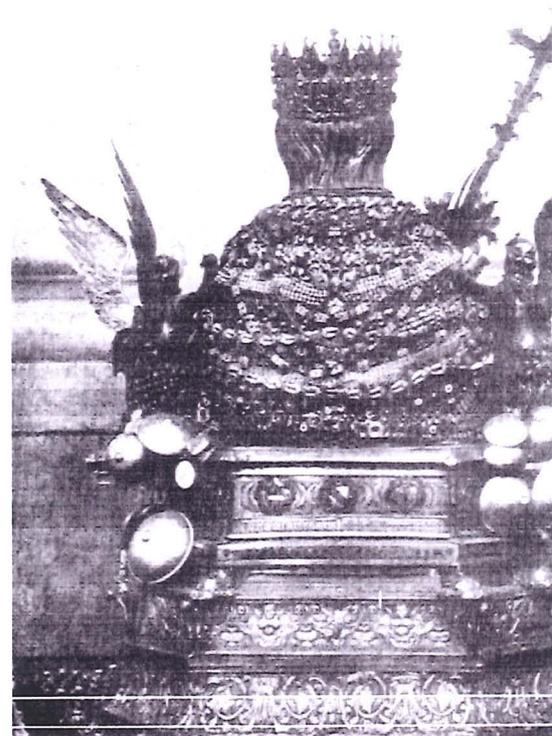


fig.131 Giovanni Bartolo, *Bust of St. Agatha*, rear view, Catania, Duomo.

Many miracles were claimed to have occurred during the late mediaeval period involving the transformation of the host into bleeding piles of meat, usually to reassure doubters on the subject of transubstantiation.⁹² The presence of Jesus' actual wounded flesh during communion was a vital element of late mediaeval Christianity because it represented the promise of salvation which ensued from Christ's tormented death on the cross. Agatha appearing with her wounded flesh on a plate reinforces this central message of Christianity. She, like Christ, sacrificed her body for humanity and is thus an inspiration to all doubters.

A panel painting by Macrino d'Alba reinforces this message (fig.129). In this image Agatha is coupled with St. Francis, a saint strongly associated with the torture of the Crucifixion. So close was Francis' identification with the sufferings of Christ that, after experiencing a vision of the crucifixion, he was one of the first people to suffer stigmata:

'the marks of the nails began to appear in his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little before in the crucified man ... Furthermore, his right side was as though it had been pierced by a lance and had a wound in it that frequently bled so that his tunic and trousers were very often covered with blood.'⁹³

To demonstrate this, in Macrino's painting, Francis holds a staff which takes the form of a cross at the top, with a miniature figure of the crucified Christ. Agatha's

⁹²Bynum 1991, 185; Rubin, 1991, 108-128.

⁹³Thomas of Celano, 'The First Life of St. Francis of Assisi by Thomas of Celano', in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1991, 1, 309-310.

hand, holding up her breasts resting on a plate, is just below the image of Christ, closely connecting the two symbols.⁹⁴

Pain and Visualisation in the Middle Ages.

According to the Blessed Angela of Foligno, a thirteenth-century follower of St. Francis, one of the three gifts of God ‘... is the desire to feel all the sufferings, burdens, and griefs borne by the heart and body of the most sweet Jesus Christ and His tender mother ...’.⁹⁵ This continual emphasis on pain and suffering, and the reality of the human body in all its gory detail, pervaded religious life in the late Middle Ages while religious life pervaded society to a level it is hard to fully comprehend today. In many respects, this emphasis on suffering mirrored everyday life: famine and plague were endemic, public spectacles of the torture and killing of prisoners and criminals were common-place, teeth were pulled and even surgery performed with no anaesthetic. Guglielmo da Saliceto, an Italian surgeon of the thirteenth century, recorded his treatment of breast cancer in a medical treatise: the entire tumour must be cut away using ‘a very sharp knife’ and then the wound was cauterised with a hot iron and the application of soothing substances.⁹⁶ The idea of a woman undergoing such treatment without anaesthesia is appalling today, but in the Middle Ages it could have been lifesaving.

⁹⁴For Macrino d’Alba see Villata, 2000.

⁹⁵Angela of Foligno, *The Book of the Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, 1909 ed., 144.

⁹⁶Guglielmo da Saliceto, *Chirurgie de Guillaume de Salicet*, 1896 ed., 108-109, cited in Yalom, 1997, 211.

Besides such experience of medicine, women (those lucky enough to find a husband and to be fertile) could expect to be pregnant for much of their married lives. Childbirth was feared, justifiably as it was accompanied by illness and death in a frighteningly high proportion of cases.⁹⁷ In addition married women could reasonably expect a certain amount of violence to be directed at their person by their husbands who were entirely within the law when beating their wives. Indeed, as lord and masters, men were considered to be failing their duty if they did not keep their wives in line. Cherubino of Siena, who wrote a handbook on married life in the fourteenth century, recommended that husbands should be gentle in the corrections of their wives at first, but if all else failed they should ‘take up the stick, and beat her thoroughly’.⁹⁸ Suffering and violence were part of life.

This was also true of torture; although hated and feared, it was an accepted and legal part of the workings of justice in most countries of Europe from the thirteenth century.⁹⁹ Writers interested in the workings of the law, such as the thirteenth-century Italian lawyer Azo and Pope Innocent IV, developed, during the period, a Romano-Canonical procedure for the use of torture which was resorted to only if a serious crime had been committed and was limited by many restrictions.¹⁰⁰ These were often misused, however. Because law and religion were intimately linked and because the Catholic faith places great emphasis on confession, criminals in Italy could not be convicted unless they had confessed and often torture was required to elicit the necessary confession. It was believed that God would

⁹⁷King, 1991, 2-5.

⁹⁸Cherubino da Siena, *Regole della vita matrimoniale*, 1888 ed., 10-13.

⁹⁹Peters, 1985, 49-57.

¹⁰⁰Peters, 1985, 57.

strengthen the innocent to withstand the torments of torture and not confess and therefore anyone who did confess was truly guilty.¹⁰¹

Today it is recognised that the infliction of unbearable pain on the human body can, in the vast majority of cases, make that human being do and say almost anything because the instinct for survival which fuels the desire to stop pain is virtually irresistible, and in practice many may have realised this seven hundred years ago. But this was not given credence in the doctrine on criminal proceedings of the late mediaeval and renaissance periods; as Azo stated, 'Torture is the inquiry after truth by means of torment'.¹⁰² Thus those accused of a serious crime routinely suffered on the rack and other devices constructed with the specific aim of inflicting unimaginable amounts of pain on the human body.

In the modern western world torture is reviled. Human rights groups devote a vast amount of resources to try and ensure that torture is eradicated from the world and indeed it has been increasingly condemned and abolished throughout the west for several centuries. It still continues, however, in many countries, but for reasons very different from those pertaining to the mediaeval use of torture. In the mediaeval period it was a tool in the search for truth, something which was unpleasant but necessary, and it was a legitimate function of many governments, not something which had to be lied about and kept secret from other governments. Truth has not been and is not the fundamental goal of torture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The realisation that the process of torture, where a human being is rendered utterly powerless, gradually causes a break-down of the human character,

¹⁰¹Peters, 1985, 57.

¹⁰²Cited in Peters, 1985, 1.

has not only resulted in the repugnance which is now generally felt about torture, but also in a realisation by corrupt governments that it can be used to bring populations into line through fear, not of pain, but of the theft of individual identity.¹⁰³

These contrasting functions of torture - on the one hand the pursuit of truth and on the other the breaking down of individual character - tend to suggest that the initial reaction of a mediaeval viewer to an image of torture must have been qualitatively different from a twenty-first-century reaction.

In his recent work, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, Mitchell Merback has discussed at some length the religious implications of the visual spectacle of public torture and execution conducted throughout the late Middle Ages and the effect such scenes had on art of the period.¹⁰⁴ Convincingly, Merback argues that images of the crucified thieves who accompanied Jesus on the hill of Golgotha were modelled on what would have been contemporary experiences of torture and execution.¹⁰⁵

Execution was turned into a *spectacle* which people were encouraged to attend, in part because the exercise of law in so public a fashion legitimised the power of authority, but also because the public spectacle of an execution could provide the opportunity for a ritualistic and devotional religious experience.¹⁰⁶ St Catherine of Siena describes this experience in exalted terms in a letter where she records her relations with a young man condemned to die. Having initially rebelled

¹⁰³See Cavanaugh, 1998, 27-30. For other studies of the operation of torture see Bockle and Pohier, 1979; Scarry, 1985; Bartlett, 1986; Dubois, 1991.

¹⁰⁴Merback, 1999.

¹⁰⁵Merback, 1999, 21.

¹⁰⁶Merback, 1999, 17-22.

at his sentence of death, Catherine states that her visit brought him such comfort that he ‘confessed and prepared himself’ and so she agreed to be with him when he died. Subsequently she reports that upon receiving ‘his head in my hands’ she experienced a vision of the wounded Christ receiving the soul of the dead man and that she ‘stayed on the earth with the greatest of envy’.¹⁰⁷

The convicted criminal was about to die, his broken body could provide a model for imagining the crucified Christ, especially if the criminal had confessed and repented, in which case he took on the role of penitent martyr eliciting sympathy and compassion. Thus, as Merback states so succinctly,

‘... medieval people did not perceive the pain of the body as an alienating, isolating and stigmatising power that banished its bearer beyond the pale of shared experience and meaning ... Instead pain could be a powerful emblem of intersubjective experience ...’¹⁰⁸

Until very recent times, escape from the body and its frailty was impossible. Lacking the medicinal aids and sterilised privacy enjoyed in the modern western world, where painkillers are available for the slightest twinge and any bloody accidents which befall our bodies are quickly dealt with behind the closed doors of hospitals, people of the late Middle Ages faced and dealt with pain and blood in an entirely different manner from the way physical vulnerability is treated today. Explanation for and comfort from the unpleasantness of human existence was sought in religious belief and the promise of reward, and bloodied flesh was the symbol of

¹⁰⁷Catherine of Siena, *Selected Letters of Catherine Benincasa*, 1906, 111-114.

¹⁰⁸Merback, 1999, 20.

that reward. Suffering was to be borne patiently in the hope of an eternal life free from pain. Indeed, by the religious it was welcomed and apparently enjoyed. St. Catherine reported on her death bed that she was ‘... in such sweet physical tortures as I never at any time endured.’¹⁰⁹

The religious implications of mutilated flesh were so strong that they may have overridden, initially at least, any other reactions to an image of breast torture. This is not to say that disgust, shock and distress were not part of the experience: the author of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* encouraged his reader not to be repelled by the experiences which Jesus had to bear.¹¹⁰ Revulsion was understood to be a natural reaction to a mangled human body, but the Catholic church trained people to look directly at gruesome scenes and embrace them in a way which appears inexplicable today. Consider, for instance, Thomas of Celano’s description of the dead body of St. Francis and his friends reaction to it:

‘... it was wonderful to see in the middle of his hands and feet, not indeed the holes made by the nails, but the nails themselves formed out of his flesh and retaining the blackness of iron, and his right side was red with blood. These signs of martyrdom did not arouse horror in the minds of those who looked upon them, but they gave his body much beauty and grace ... those who were permitted to kiss the sacred stigmata ... [and] even those who were only permitted to see them, thought they had been granted a very great gift ... Who ... would not realise in truth that as this saint was honoured upon earth with

¹⁰⁹Catherine of Siena, *Selected Letters of Catherine Benincasa*, 1906, 350.

¹¹⁰*Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 1961 ed., 68-76.

so singular a gift, so would he also be magnified in heaven by an ineffable glory?’¹¹¹

Although appreciation of horror is evident in this excerpt, those who witnessed the saint’s stigmata saw what they believed to be evidence of God and the verification of the promise of eternal salvation. Thus the manifestation of the mutilated flesh of a saint was a very complex symbol and was not merely employed as a shock-factor to attract and titillate readers.

The Blessed Angela of Foligno directed her readers ‘come ye, oh my blessed children, and gaze on this cross and on Christ who died upon it for our sins ... raise the eyes of your minds unto that cross ...’¹¹² Similarly, throughout the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, readers are constantly urged to visualise the scenes narrated therein, to imagine themselves actually present at the various events of Christ’s life, especially the crucifixion, in order to meditate upon and ultimately empathise with the experience of Christ.¹¹³ In the Middle Ages, as now, pain was and remains an abstract concept which is ‘resistant to language’.¹¹⁴ Modern victims of torture find it hard to describe adequately the experience in words but if another person actually witnesses the process, although not experiencing the pain, they do appreciate it far more than if they had just heard or read about it. Indeed, they find it hard to banish the vision from their minds.¹¹⁵ Thus the visual qualities of both real experience,

¹¹¹Thomas of Celano, ‘The First Life of St. Francis of Assisi by Thomas of Celano’, in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1991, 1, 326-327.

¹¹²Angela of Foligno, *The Book of the Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, 1909 ed., 93-94.

¹¹³*Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 1961 ed., *passim*.

¹¹⁴Cavanaugh, 1998, 36.

¹¹⁵Cavanaugh, 1998, 36-37.

such as public execution, and artistic images could aid the religious meditations of mediaeval people.

All the above evidence suggests that people were trained and trained themselves to confront suffering directly and to see something positive in the broken, humiliated and bloodied body. Another event which created a link between the experience of real life and looking at artistic images was the production of passion plays.¹¹⁶ These dramas recounting the suffering and martyrdom of various saints were routinely performed to large crowds during ritual festivities on the feast days of individual saints. Little is known about the actual production of these plays which were changed and adapted as required over many years, but some texts printed in Florence towards the end of the fifteenth century, when the performance of *sacre rappresentazioni* was becoming less common, are available for study.¹¹⁷

Several printed dramas which tell the story of St. Agatha and other virgin martyrs who suffered stripping and breast-related torture survive, but unfortunately no reference to their actual performance or any manuscripts which might have been used during preparation for performance have been located.¹¹⁸ There is, however, evidence that some performances did represent the horrific sufferings of Christian martyr saints and, although it is not clear how exactly these were staged, cultic devotions would have been visually aided by the performance of these plays.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶See Young, 1933; Bewington, 1975, and Edwards, 1977, 22-56, for information on the development of the passion play. *Passions* emerged in the twelfth century and were initially concerned with the life of Christ. Later, however, the stories of Christian martyrs were also developed as plays.

¹¹⁷Newbigin, 1988, 269-296.

¹¹⁸Newbigin, 1988, 287.

¹¹⁹Newbigin, 1988, 289-292.

Artistic images which were carried in procession as well as relics of the saints' bodies held similar potential for visual enhancement. All such devices were designed to help the populace feel the presence of the saint and empathise with his or her suffering, for as the fifteenth-century writer Alberti stated: 'Nature provides ... that we mourn with the mourners, laugh with those who laugh, and grieve with the grief-stricken.'¹²⁰

Agatha was celebrated as a cult figure: in Florence an image of her was carried in procession on her feast day and the relic of her veil was venerated.¹²¹ In at least six other locations amputated breasts were preserved and used as the objects of devotion.¹²² The people who followed a painted image of Agatha on her feast day, or who came to pray before the relic of an amputated breast in the hope of relief from a disease of the breast or some other intervention with God, would not have been looking for sexual/sadistic titillation. They may, however, have been hoping for an emotionally moving experience, a feeling of deep empathy, love or spiritual transcendence, and the violent element of the images may have helped to stimulate these feelings. Bodily humiliation, pain and violence were embraced because Christ had suffered for mankind and in order to increase the likelihood of eventual entry into heaven. The shocking and terrifying nature of torture and violence was inverted and turned into a positive metaphor. Agatha was aligned with Christ and Mary through the symbolism of the breast and the sacrifice she made as a martyr was represented by the violence done to her breast.

¹²⁰Alberti, 'On Painting', *On Painting and On Sculpture*, 1972 ed., 2, 41.

¹²¹See note 20.

¹²²Butler, 1956, 1, 256. See also the bust of St. Agatha, dating to 1376, which is housed in the Cathedral in Catania by Giovanni Bartolo. Encrusted with finery, it is also covered in disembodied breasts (figs 130-131).

Conscious and Unconscious

These images of breast mutilation cannot therefore be interpreted from a modern standpoint. But it might be argued that this was only the official slant on images of Agatha and other female saints suffering breast torture. Was the religious gloss on scenes of breast mutilation simply an excuse for male viewers to look at naked female bodies and enjoy their vulnerability and powerlessness? Not all people went to public executions to experience religious devotion; some, no doubt, derived perverted pleasure from the sight, just as some would today if public hanging were reinstated. Similarly, individual responses to art do not necessarily follow what the artist intended or what the wider doctrine on the function of art dictates.

But individual responses to an image of breast torture which may have been viewed as sacrilegious or in some way inappropriate are unlikely to be documented in primary sources. Just as the unconscious or subliminal motivations of an artist who painted an image of breast torture could be deeply buried under religious platitudes, so too were the individual reactions of a mediaeval viewer likely to have been well-hidden. Modern hypotheses offered on this subject must be even more general and qualified than analysis based on widely sanctioned doctrine.¹²³

¹²³As discussed in Chapter One, it was acknowledged during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance that artistic images could evoke a sexual response and several writers urged artists to take care when painting religious images. See Hamburger, 1989, 161-182; Trexler, 1993, 107-119; Camille, 1998, 139-154; Mills, 2002, 152-173 for discussions of possible unofficial sexual responses to art, also Laqueur, 1990; Bullough and Brundage, 1994 and Lochrie, McCracken and Schultz, 1997, for discussion on sexuality in the Middle Ages.

As far as the Christian Church was concerned, in one sense nudity was shameful, especially for virgins. Indeed Tertullian states that ‘... every public exposure of a virgin is (to her) a suffering of rape ...’¹²⁴ Many stories tell of how holy women of the early Christian period were too ashamed even to let medical men examine their breasts when they were ill.¹²⁵ The public stripping of a virgin martyr thus became part of her torture and this is often mentioned in their *Vitae*.¹²⁶ Yet in the visual depictions, such as the torture of St. Agatha, female saints are condemned to appear for all eternity in a state of undress and by looking at her the viewer may be said to continue her humiliation.¹²⁷

These scenes of women having their breasts cut off are voyeuristic. The viewer is irresistibly drawn into the horrific proceedings, in many cases even by the victim herself because she gazes straight out of the painting, apparently catching the gaze of the viewer. What is more, whatever the persona of the female and whatever the torture they suffered, because the usual format for the narrative of virgin martyrs’ lives describes them defending their virginity against a specific male authority, and the rejected male generally oversees the consequential punishment he orders, inevitably this element of the stories was included in visual narratives of torture.

A *Trecento* panel of the life of S. Reparata, now in New York, includes the man who ordered her torture watching from a balcony high above her and he even

¹²⁴Tertullian, ‘On the Veiling of Virgins’ in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1994, 4, 29.

¹²⁵Yalom, 1997, 31-32.

¹²⁶Miles, 1992, 56-57.

¹²⁷See Easton, 1994, 97-98 for a discussion of the implications of the gaze of the viewer, which, she claims, is ignored by theological readings of the image made by such history-based writers such as Caroline Walker Bynum.

points as if encouraging his companion, as well as viewers of the painting, to look (fig.132).¹²⁸ In the case of Agatha, the Roman governor, Quintianus, is often depicted watching the torture he ordered. Can it be assumed that a mediaeval viewer would have interpreted this as meaning that these male characters are enjoying some form of sexual gratification because they have been denied sexual access to the bodies they torture? Possibly: one need only glance at some of the stories of Boccaccio's *Decameron* to know that sexual jealousy and revenge were endemic human emotions then as now.¹²⁹

But does this mean that a mediaeval male viewer would have had any sympathy for a figure such as Quintianus? Would he have identified with Quintianus in any sense? If so then, when putting himself 'in the shoes of' Quintianus and imagining sexual rejection, he might have been tempted to think Agatha got what she deserved and even have derived some satisfaction or pleasure from the torture scenes, if not the kind of sexual gratification that we associate nowadays with violent pornography.

All human beings, male and female, suffer pain and can empathise with another's suffering. Cross-gender identification would have been made easier by the fact that the blurring of sexual borders, implied by the paralleling of Christ with a

¹²⁸For S. Reparata see the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 9,123-128; Kaftal, 1952, (*Tuscan Painting*), 881. The pointing motif, drawing the attention of the viewer to the central action of an image, is an artistic convention which was employed in scenes such as the Massacre of the Innocents by Giotto in the Arena Chapel frescoes and therefore does not in itself indicate a sado-sexual voyeuristic function, but does perhaps relate to a shocking and violent image. My thanks to Dr. Louise Bourdua for drawing my attention to this.

¹²⁹See for instance, Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1972 ed., 388, 457, 620, 645.

female saint, was common in the writing and ideology of the Middle Ages.¹³⁰ Christ himself was often characterised as a mother to the members of his church and women who dedicated their life to Christianity and had transcended their sexual natures were commonly said to have “become male”.¹³¹ Again, this concept dates back to the early Christian church: St. Augustine wrote of the female martyrs: ‘... they ... are ... neither male or female; so that even in them that are women in body the manliness of their souls hides the sex of their flesh ...’¹³² In late mediaeval Italy the idea was still prevalent: Boccaccio complimented Andrea Acciaiuoli, to whom he addressed his work *Concerning Famous Women*, stating:

‘... I saw that what Nature has taken from the weaker sex God in his liberality has granted to you, instilling marvellous virtues within your breast, and that he willed you to be known by the name you bear [since in Greek *andres* means “men”] ...’¹³³

Women were thought to be generally so little able to lead an ascetic religious life that those who did became elevated to maleness as an indication of their strength

¹³⁰This is the subject of chapter three in Bynum’s *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 1991, 79-118; see also her work *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 1982; Fratzen, 1993, 143-169.

¹³¹Castelli, 1991, 24-49; Miles, 1992, 53-77. In the *Golden Legend* there are recorded several instances where deeply religious women actually don male clothing and pass as men, living in monasteries for much of their lives: see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., *St. Marina*, 1, 342; *St. Pelagia*, 2, 231; *St. Margaret*, 2, 232-233. The young virgin of Antioch also becomes male when she exchanges clothes with a knight in order to escape from a brothel before achieving martyrdom, 1, 252. Although the idea of a heroic woman being in some way male is a Christian concept in this sense, the characterisation of brave, noble women as virile and male dates far back into Antiquity, as is discussed in the final two chapters.

¹³²St. Augustine, *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, 1959, Sermon 282.

¹³³Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 1964 ed., Dedication, xxxiii.

and fortitude. By the heroic defence of her virginity and the withstanding of pain Agatha proved herself spiritually superior and worthy of the title 'male'. Male and female viewers alike could aspire to her courage and empathise with her suffering.¹³⁴

As was noted in the first chapter, Jesus was often associated in religious writings with breastfeeding, His side-wound was paralleled with Mary's breast, and these concepts were also implied in some images of Him. He thereby demonstrates, via a uniquely female function of the body, his great love for mankind. In effect, the gender of the spiritually elevated was irrelevant: they were both male and female and could encompass the most positive virtues of both sexes. This suggests that those at or very near the pinnacle of the spiritual hierarchy, such as Christ and the virgin martyrs, were characterised as having minimal sexual personae with which to tempt, shame or corrupt Christians who looked upon them. (As noted earlier, the female reader of the text *Meditations on the Life of Christ* was encouraged to visualise the nude body of Christ.) Males and females were conditioned to think of the bodies of Christ and his saints as being so chaste and innocent that they held no erotic value and many would have castigated themselves for thinking otherwise when viewing images of the naked body of a female saint.

¹³⁴It has also been suggested that by the loss of her breasts Agatha physically becomes male for a short period of time thereby enabling male viewers to better empathise with her, and this is why, although the *vita* in the *Golden Legend* records that only one breast was cut off, in many artistic images both her breasts are being assailed, in order partly to increase the male viewer's ability to identify with Agatha, see Easton, 1994, 101. This does not appear a valid suggestion, however. Even although her breasts are severed, images usually depict the process as it happens, with at least one breast still visible in some form; it therefore appears unlikely that a male viewer could conveniently forget that he is looking at a painting of a woman in order to be able to more fully identify with her. And indeed, given the fluidity of gender borders discussed above, it would have been unnecessary.

This argument might be countered by pointing out that breast torture is gender specific, an attack on an area which can and does represent female sexuality. There do not appear to be any corresponding incidences of graphic depictions of male saints suffering explicit gender specific torture such as castration.¹³⁵ Does this then prove that these images of breast torture do, in fact, represent in some perhaps unconscious fashion a violent expression of porno-sadistic male attitudes to women?

While it may be said that there are no scenes of the castration of male saints dating to the Middle Ages, neither are there any depictions of female saints suffering torture to their actual genital area. There are, however, many depictions of sinners of both sexes suffering torture to their genitals in scenes of the Last Judgement dating to the Middle Ages and Renaissance (see, for instance, Giotto's *Last Judgement* in the Arena Chapel, Padua, dating to the first decade of the *Trecento* and Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* on the end wall of the Sistine Chapel, from two centuries later).¹³⁶ These scenes also often show the blessed entering heaven, naked, innocent and pure. The implication of this is that if someone of either sex was a sinner then the most graphic and gruesome depictions of their genitals was deemed

¹³⁵This is true despite Sam Riches' convincing arguments concerning St. George and the possible suggestion of castration in a least one depiction of him, see Riches, 2000, 60-67 and Riches, 2002, 65-85. These images are symbolic and not graphic and St. George, as Riches argues, is de-sexed by being stripped naked, as are male and female saints generally.

¹³⁶Female sinners in hell, in particular personifications of the vice most associated with sexual sin, Lust/Luxuria, were also often depicted having their breasts as well as genitals bitten at by snakes, see Chapter Five below. While this clearly suggests that some sexual connotation was attached to the female breast in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance, perhaps it can be read as a punishment of women for using their breasts for sexual purposes as opposed to the virtuous function for which they were designed.

appropriate and acceptable, particularly as sexual immorality was seen as a common part of a sinful life. But this was not the case with images of saints who, for the most part, had led sin-free or penitent lives.

This being the case, it appears unlikely that depictions of attacks on the breasts of female saints would have been deemed acceptable if it was thought that they could be viewed with any sexual connotation. Despite the modern sexual fascination, breasts are not straightforward sexual reproductive organs, they are smoothly enclosed by normal skin and do not suggest in any way the actual sexual act, in the way that a vagina or penis does, with their raw-looking skin and implications of apertures and penetrations.

In the attempt to establish unorthodox or unconscious reactions of a mediaeval viewer to images of breast torture, it is again important to remember that while the motif of the breast did not, at that time, necessarily represent a sexual organ it did represent some of the most virtuous qualities of women: the ability to give altruistic love and nourishment. It appears more likely that much of the unconscious, as well as the conscious, reaction of a fourteenth-century viewer to images of breast torture, rather than expressing suppressed, sadistic, sexual emotion, pertained more to attitudes to motherhood.

The association between motherhood and breast torture is given explicit expression in a depiction of the story of Ss. Quirius and Julitta, dating to the first half of the *Quattrocento*, on the predella of an altarpiece by Masolino and Masaccio (fig. 133).¹³⁷ It is reported in the *Golden Legend* that St. Quirius was only three years

¹³⁷See the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 5, 1324-1328, for information on the

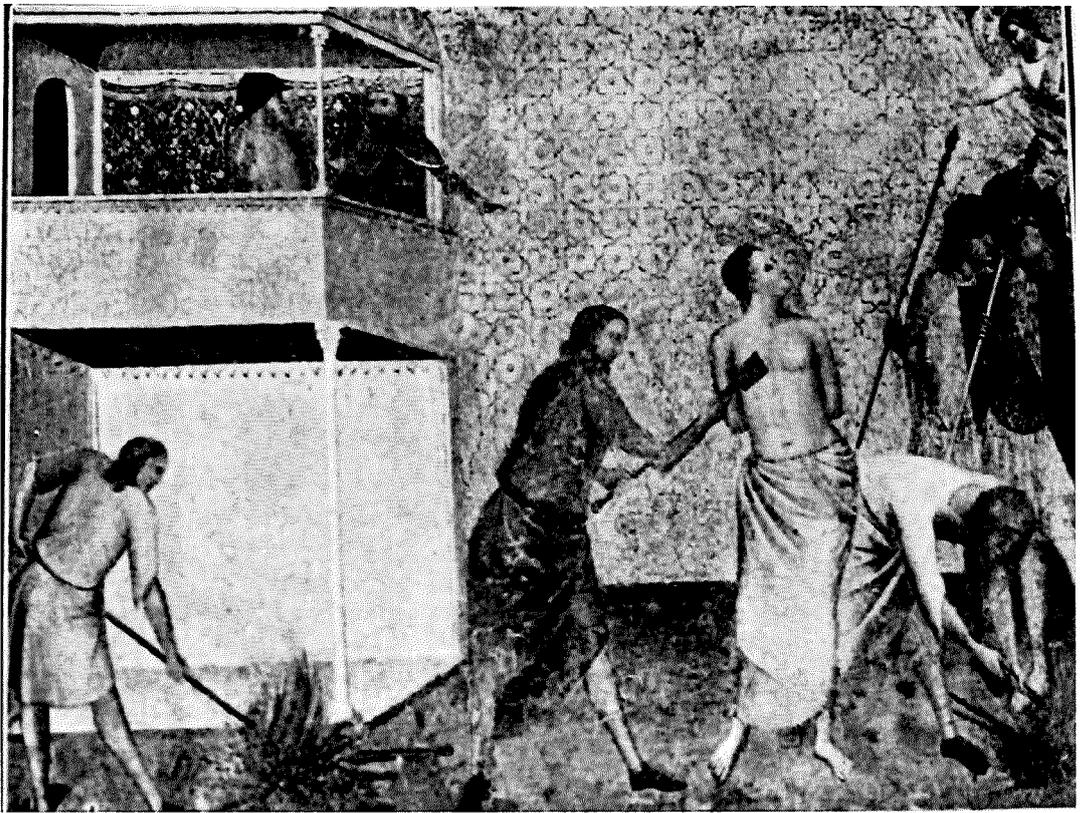


fig.132 Anon, *The Torture of St. Reparata*, 14th century, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Blumenthal Collection.



fig.133 Masolino and Masaccio, *The Torture of Ss. Julitta and Quiricus*, 15th century, Gloucester, Highmen Court, Gambier Perry Collection.

old when he witnessed his mother being scourged with raw thongs before avowing his faith and being murdered by Alexander the governor of Tarsus.¹³⁸ Although the legend does not mention any specific injury done to Julitta's breasts, Masolino and Masaccio (and others) have depicted her breasts being assailed by iron hooks.¹³⁹

In fact, the earliest source of this legend (in particular the *Martyrology of Jerome*) records that Julitta had her eyes put out by her persecutors.¹⁴⁰ It is possible that for an artist depicting such a scene, the use of the leitmotiv of breast torture provided a distillation of the message to be communicated by the image; the mutilation of the breasts is a far more emotionally significant torture to carry out on the mother of a small child who is witnessing the proceedings.¹⁴¹ For any child of three, merely witnessing a brutal attack on their mother would be a horrific torture in itself. An attack on her breasts, which not only sustained and gave the child life, but which also represent her unconditional love for them, makes for an even more resonant image. This would have been certainly understood in the late Middle Ages,

sources of these saints' legends.

¹³⁸Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 323-324.

¹³⁹Kaftal, (*Tuscan Painting*), 1952, 866.

¹⁴⁰*Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 5, 1324. There is an interesting correlation between these two pairs of soft round parts of the anatomy, the breasts and the eyes, also reflected in the legend of St. Lucy, yet another virgin martyr, who visited the tomb of St. Agatha and in a vision received encouragement in the defence of her faith from Agatha, before suffering persecution and torture in the form of the putting out of her eyes, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 27-29. It has also been suggested that the cutting off of two soft round and sexually significant parts of the body might subconsciously suggest castration to a man, thereby further heightening empathic response, see Easton, 1994, 101.

¹⁴¹Easton also argues that by looking at Agatha with deep religious feeling and empathy the male viewer becomes spiritually lovesick for her and gives up his power to her, becoming infantilised himself, investing her with maternal characteristics so that the relevance of the mutilation is particularly powerful, see Easton, 1994, 105.

when motherhood was idealised and breastfeeding was a symbol of loving motherhood.

However, as discussed in Chapter One, maternal breastfeeding was actually becoming increasingly replaced by wetnursing in the fourteenth and fifteenth century among Italian women of the wealthier classes.¹⁴² The fate of many children, divided from their mothers at only a few days old, fed by women who at best could love them for only a few years before they were returned and who at worst neglected and physically abused them, is well documented. This trend, along with the apparent condemnation of wetnursing by many male writers, has suggested to some modern writers that, whereas Mary represented an ideal mother, the breast mutilation of Julitta, Agatha and other female martyrs, as depicted in art, represents a fantasised punishment of their mothers by the patrons or the artists who created such works; both for sending them out to wet nurses, and for not giving them the type of unconditional love they were due.¹⁴³

But, as further discussed in Chapter One, the apparent condemnation of women for not breastfeeding their babies found in contemporary literature was not as simple as may seem, and indeed wetnursing was a custom widely accepted by men as well as women. Men who were sent to wetnurses themselves regularly arranged for their children to be similarly treated for various reasons, not all of which indicate poor parenting, lack of love or negligence. It is a modern construct that mothers must have close contact with their babies or trauma will occur in the infant.

¹⁴²Klapisch-Zuber, 1983, 33-64.

¹⁴³See Easton, 1994, 105.

Only in very isolated cases can it have been possible for male viewers to have gained some kind of satisfactory revenge on unloving mothers through looking at images of breast mutilation. Given that Agatha and, to a greater or lesser extent all female saints, were aligned not only with Christ but also with the Virgin Mary - the epitome of the perfect mother - they do not appear to be the appropriate subjects on which to vent such feelings. The mediaeval male unconscious would have had to work hard to divide these female exemplae from all the idealistic associations of female martyrs in order to use them as models for bad women who deserved the punishments they receive.

However, while the power gained through faith, as depicted in images of the suffering of female saints, may have inspired religious devotees of both sexes, it appears likely that they were particularly inspiring for women who were, in so many cases, lacking in individual power. The tortured virgin martyrs, such as Agatha, rejected their own flesh as a means of gaining greater spirituality and thus they rejected the sexual and reproductive role laid down by society throughout much of history for women.¹⁴⁴ The use of the motif of breast mutilation to express this is particularly effective because of the strong connotations of motherhood and sexuality attached to that area of the female body.

Although in the scenes of horrific torture, Agatha and her counterparts can be viewed as victims of men, one of the most important religious messages - salvation for the virtuous - implies that the so-called victims will always be victorious in the end.¹⁴⁵ These women, whatever the pain inflicted upon them, because they have

¹⁴⁴Bynum, 1987, 220-227; Fratzen, 1993, 163.

¹⁴⁵Quilligan, 1991, 220.

faith also have power, both to withstand the pain and to choose their own destiny and die for their faith.¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, the central male characters in these cases have no real power: they never get what they really want, sexual intercourse with their victims. Furthermore the tortures they exact on the bodies of the female saints are self-defeating because they actually have no mental effect on the saints (who are only too pleased that they are going to be martyred and as a result very soon will be with Christ).¹⁴⁷

There was a great increase in lay spirituality among women in the late Middle Ages and the extreme behaviour of some caused their families much distress.¹⁴⁸ The rejection of food and the rejection of food provision for the family appears to have been an ubiquitous element of the lives of mediaeval Italian holy women, who instead insisted on providing food for the poor and needy.¹⁴⁹ Again,

¹⁴⁶This is pointed out by Easton, 1994, 107, but she dismisses the point fairly quickly because ‘Masochism, like sadism, cannot be pleasurable or understandable unless we grant that both require a modicum of power’.

¹⁴⁷The torture has very little physical effect either in the long run; Agatha, for example, is healed by St. Peter. Emphasis is also placed, in the *vitae* of other tortured female martyrs, on their ability to appear healthy and fresh after suffering terrible torments. For instance, the *Golden Legend* records that St. Catherine, after torture, was shut up for twelve days without food, and her torturer ‘expected to find her worn out by the long fast but instead saw her more radiant than ever’, Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 2, 337. One of the main aims of torture is to render the body voiceless, see Scarry, 1985, *passim*. But the attempts of the male authority to obliterate the Christian female voice does not succeed in the legends; the victim generally continues to avow her faith until the moment of death, even in the case of St. Christine, whose tongue was cut out, see note 4. And Agatha continues to argue her case in a manner which demonstrates great abilities of discourse and even detailed knowledge of law, see D’Arrigo, 1985, for a discussion of this aspect of the martyrdom of St. Agatha. It is also interesting to note that Quintianus, the male protagonist of Agatha’s story, ends up dead, as is commonly the case in the legends of virgin martyrs.

¹⁴⁸Bynum, 1987, 220-227.

¹⁴⁹Bynum, 1987, *passim*.

the concepts of food provision and breastfeeding were intimately entwined. The idea of rejecting the physical breast can be seen as a metaphor for rejecting the physical ties of motherhood. In contrast these holy women, like Agatha, found the means to nourish their senses by doing the work of the Lord and providing food as an act of charity. Emaciated and disfigured by the hardships imposed on their flesh, they achieved to some extent the sexless state they desired; breasts shrivel away to almost nothing in the anorexic figure.

Although there were saintly mothers, they were rare and expected to put their faith before their family. Women who were married and possibly had children, but who wanted to lead holy lives, often tried to persuade their husbands to live together without sexual contact and some succeeded, as was the case with the Blessed Catherine of Genoa.¹⁵⁰ Others had to wait until they were widowed to gain the freedom and chastity which was essential in achieving a truly holy state.

By rejecting her sex and refusing to marry, a woman was in a sense becoming independent from men. She had to make a choice to live this way and in some cases had to be very strong and courageous. Indeed, fathers who had advantageous marriages planned and who did not wish their daughters to live the lives of celibate lay holy women or to enter monasteries would resort to violence and imprisonment in order to exact their will.¹⁵¹ Thus images of St. Agatha and other virgin saints suffering terrible torture in order to keep their chastity may well have inspired those women who also decided to lead a chaste life.

¹⁵⁰King, 1991, 133.

¹⁵¹Such was the case with Celia Gonzaga, daughter of the Marquis of Mantua in the late fifteenth century, see King, 1976, 280-304.

However, the increased numbers of women seeking a religious and thus independent life may have triggered hidden fears among men. Perhaps the depiction of such scenes was, in some sense, a warning to women about how unpleasant life could be if they made the choice to live without men. This point can perhaps be illuminated by comparison with the implied meaning found in the Amazon legend of ancient Greece. According to Greek writers, Amazon women chose to sleep with men only once a year, refused to suckle male babies and cut off one of their breasts in order to be more effective archers and therefore kill Greek men with greater ease.¹⁵² For the Greeks this myth explained why women had to be controlled and kept at home while men fought and conducted business, for if women were allowed into public life they might start taking control. It is not clear whether there was any historical foundation to the Amazon legend, but it clearly found a place in male consciousness and many images depicting the violent defeat of Amazon women by the Greeks decorated public places. These depictions can also be read in one sense as a warning to women about the consequences of choosing to live outwith male authority.

In the same way the visual depictions of breast mutilation produced in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance can, perhaps, be interpreted as exhortations to wifely chastity, reflecting the prevalent fear among wealthy laymen that their wives would be unfaithful. This particular fear appears to have been a recurring paranoia throughout much of history. Again, in ancient Greece men were similarly convinced that women were more prone to sexual immoderation and this appears to have been

¹⁵²For a discussion of the sources and development of the Amazon myth see Tyrrell, 1984. See also Yalom, 1997, 21-24 and Baskins, 1998, 26-49. Baskins discusses the appearance of scenes of Amazon defeat which appeared on fifteenth-century Italian marriage chests, where they represented examples of women tamed by marriage.

a generating factor in the development of the Amazon myth.¹⁵³ Occurring in a society where women were considered inferior, the images of independent women may have been an externalising of male fears.¹⁵⁴

But interpretations which focus on the very negative aspects of images of breast mutilation tend to underplay the reasons why the breast was chosen to express such convoluted meanings in thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italy. Representations of breast mutilation (of any date) suggest an inherent and still acknowledged understanding of the positive and ancient power of women as it is symbolised by the breast. Like all the manifestations of breast imagery discussed in this thesis, the mutilation of breasts was an image loaded with varying significance for the people of the late mediaeval and renaissance period, it would have been read differently by monks, nuns, and lay men and women, and this breadth of meanings cannot easily be defined or understood by present-day historians.

Development of Sexualised Images in the Sixteenth Century.

The popularity of classical subject matter amongst patrons and artists of the *Cinquecento* resulted in the appearance in art of the naked human form to an extent not seen since classical times. The beauty of these images, which could be viewed and admired without any religious strictures, inevitably led to changes in the way nudity was depicted and viewed in religious images and this ultimately led to the banning of unnecessary displays of nakedness in religious painting.

¹⁵³Tyrrell, 1984, 28.

¹⁵⁴Yalom, 1997, 23.

In the early part of the century changes in the depiction of St. Agatha can be detected, although the drawing of parallels between Christ and Agatha continued, as is demonstrated by Sebastiano del Piombo's *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha* dating to c.1517 (Florence, Palazzo Pitti, fig.134).¹⁵⁵ If this work is compared to Sebastiano's *Flagellation* of 1525, the similarity of composition is clear in the positioning of the twisting bodies and the binding of the arms (fig.135). The two are in fact based on an invention of Michelangelo, which would eventually find full expression in the Borgherini *Flagellation*, although the closeness of the figures to the front plane of the painting, which makes Sebastiano's scenes so powerful, is in fact a Venetian device.¹⁵⁶

Originally commissioned for Enrico Rangone on his promotion to Cardinal, the choice of subject matter is explained by the fact that Rangone's titular church was Sant'Agata.¹⁵⁷ But this example of *The Martyrdom of St. Agatha*, however, judging by its size and format, was evidently intended as a collector's item to be hung in a private room and not in a church. Indeed Vasari records seeing it in the *guardaroba* of Guidobaldo Della Rovere around 1566, suggesting that it must, at some point, have been sold to the family of the Duke of Urbino.¹⁵⁸ In the tradition of Giorgione and Titian, as well as Michelangelo, Sebastiano's very beautiful and sensual figure reveals the increasing interest in the classically rendered nude woman and the more explicit sexuality which was to become a common feature of art of the *Cinquecento*.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵Lucco and Volpe, 1980, 113; Hirst, 1981, 76-78.

¹⁵⁶Hirst, 1981, 78.

¹⁵⁷Hirst, 1981, 76.

¹⁵⁸Vasari, *Le Vite*, 1966 ed., 5, 99.

¹⁵⁹Hirst, 1981, 78.



fig.134 Sebastiano del Piombo, *Martyrdom of St. Agatha*, c1517, Florence, Palazzo Pitti.

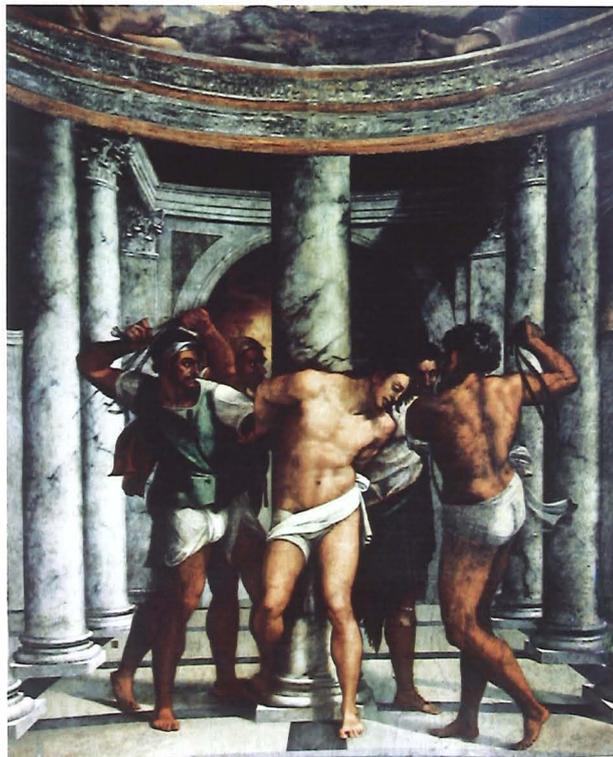


fig.135 Sebastiano del Piombo, *Flagellation of Christ*, 1525, Rome, San Pietro in Montorio.

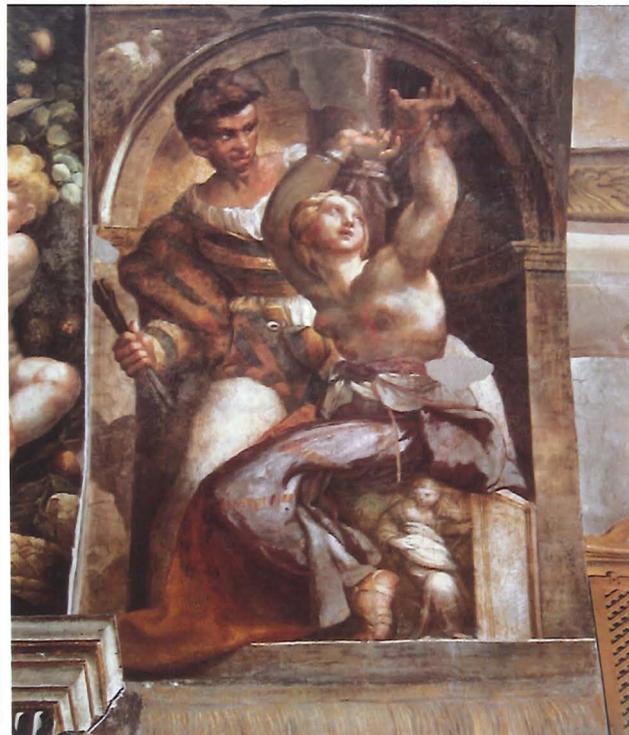


fig.136 Parmigianino, *Martyrdom of St. Agatha*, c.1522, Parma, San Giovanni Evangelista.

This image shows a beautiful, nude woman, rendered powerless and vulnerable by her attackers, brought very close to the frontal plane of the painting so that her enticing flesh dominates the scene and can be fully appreciated by the viewer who may well have kept this image for his own private contemplation in his home. This contrasts markedly with the images examined above, dating to the early Renaissance, which were not dominated by large expanses of exposed female flesh and which were usually intended for public viewing on at least some occasions. Furthermore, there is a complete absence of any physical evidence of torture on the body of St. Agatha in the later painting. Indeed, in most scenes of breast mutilation of a later date, Agatha appears still unscathed, as in Sebastiano's version. The admiration of a beautiful female body would undoubtedly be marred by the gory details of torture, and so it can be surmised that the erotic potential of a painting such as Sebastiano's was given higher priority than had previously been the case.

However, the sensual rendering of a female body does not entirely rule out the possibility that it was viewed with some religious purpose. In his 1981 study of Sebastiano del Piombo, Michael Hirst states that Sebastiano's painting of St. Agatha 'can scarcely have been ordered as an object to excite religious devotion; it was rather a collector's piece, however repellent its subject-matter may seem to twentieth century taste.'¹⁶⁰ And yet, although the image may have been a collector's piece, many private commissions of collectors were intended as devotional works, as Hirst himself confirms only a few lines later, Sebastiano 'adopted for a scene of violence a formal solution more frequently adopted by his compatriots for meditative themes like the domestic half-length *Virgin with Saints*'.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰Hirst, 1981, 77.

¹⁶¹Hirst, 1981, 78.

Thus neither the intended function nor the format of the image precludes religious devotion. Presumably Hirst is implying that it is either the repellent subject matter or the fact that the painting portrays an apparently erotic and sadistic image which means that the image was not designed to evoke religious devotion. The subject matter, however, cannot itself be at fault considering that for many years previously images of Agatha and many other tortured saints had been used as the focus for spiritual meditation, and as David Rosand has pointed out in his article on 'icons of pathos', images of extreme human emotion and experience would continue to be so used in the *Cinquecento*.¹⁶² In these images the aesthetic pleasure induced by the beauty of the paintings, and the figures therein, would serve to enhance the empathic response of the viewer. It is also valid to point out that Sebastiano's *Flagellation of Christ* is an equally beautiful depiction of the naked human form and it certainly had devotional purpose. It is therefore once more a judgement of modern standards to assume that just because an image depicts a beautiful nude female at the mercy of male attackers, the original audience looked at it with simply prurient intent.

A few years after Sebastiano painted his *Martyrdom of St. Agatha*, Parmigianino executed in the church of San Giovanni Evangelista, Parma, a fresco of the martyrdom which in some ways is comparable (fig.136).¹⁶³ Dating to c1522 and painted on the left wall of the first chapel on the left of the nave, Parmigianino's *Martyrdom of St Agatha* faces another fresco of Ss. Lucy and Apollonia.¹⁶⁴ But

¹⁶²Rosand, 1994, 34-52.

¹⁶³Freedberg, 1950, 44-48; Ekserdjian, 1988, 443-454; Gould, 1994, 22-26.

¹⁶⁴St. Apollonia of Alexandria was another virgin martyr who was killed around the middle of the third century. One of the most notable tortures which this saint suffered was the forced removal of her teeth and these or the instruments of torture

while these two sit serenely in iconic rather than narrative scenes (apart from the fact that Lucy holds her attribute in the form of a pair of eyes on a plate), the image of Agatha depicts her tied to a post with her torturer in attendance. As with Sebastiano's painting, Parmigianino has chosen to isolate that one most resonant incident from Agatha's life, and the image is much larger than depictions of the torture dating to previous centuries. Again she is portrayed stripped to the waist at the moment just before the torture actually takes place and once more Michelangelo was a major influence on the treatment of her nude form.¹⁶⁵

Although the chapel which this fresco decorates passed to a private family - that of Francesco Ariani - in the 1530s, at the time Parmigianino was executing the St. Agatha it was still under the jurisdiction of the Benedictine monks of San Giovanni Evangelista, who presumably directed the decoration of the chapel.¹⁶⁶ The choice of subject matter evidently relates to the dedication of the chapel and ultimately to devotional interests peculiar to those Benedictine monks. The chapel is dedicated to virgins who, according to legend, appeared in a vision alongside the Virgin Mary, to St. John first Abbot of San Giovanni Evangelista, on his death-bed.¹⁶⁷

were her most common identifying attribute. Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 268-269; *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, 1990, 2, 258-268. For St. Lucy see note 140.

¹⁶⁵Gould, 1994, 26. Although Parmigianino had not actually visited Rome at the time he painted the St. Agatha fresco, it is clearly based on the figure of Eve in the Temptation on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling. It is presumed that Parmigianino must have seen drawings belonging to Correggio, who was also working in San Giovanni Evangelista at the time and who himself was a great influence on Parmigianino.

¹⁶⁶Ekserdjian, 1988, 446-447.

¹⁶⁷Ekserdjian, 1988, 446-447.

But it was probably Parmigianino's own choice to show a narrative scene of Agatha's martyrdom as opposed to a more iconic scene such as he used for Ss. Lucy and Apollonia. This can be accounted for by the general iconographic programme of the two chapels he is thought to have decorated in San Giovanni Evangelista. In this first chapel dedicated to female saints, he juxtaposed a scene of violence with a scene of peace. The second chapel on the left of the nave is dedicated to male saints who are again closely associated with the Benedictine monks of San Giovanni Evangelista.¹⁶⁸ Here again Parmigianino contrasted a violent narrative image, St. Vitalis, a warrior saint, attempting to calm a wildly rearing horse, with a calm scene of two saints - probably Ss. Lawrence and Stephen - reading.¹⁶⁹ This combination of artistic and profoundly religious motivations for the depiction of the *Martyrdom of St. Agatha* indicates that such a scene of nudity combined with sensual depiction of the naked body was still acceptable and presumably passed without comment in a religious context as late as 1522, several years after Sebastiano del Piombo executed his version for Rangone. Therefore possibly neither Sebastiano nor his patron were entirely guilty of employing a scene of extreme female suffering for the purposes of simple erotic enjoyment.

In the following decades of the *Cinquecento* this type of female nudity in religious art was to become frowned upon and eventually banned by the Council of Trent during the Counter-Reformation years. It was not deemed acceptable or appropriate that religious figures of high status should be shown unclothed when so many paintings of nude pagan figures were being produced with overt sexual purpose. St Agatha, however, remained a popular figure well into the Baroque,

¹⁶⁸Ekserdjian, 1988, 444-445.

¹⁶⁹Gould, 1994, 24.

although she tended to be represented more often allegorically, fully dressed in modern garb, with her breasts on a plate, as she does in painting by Cariani of 1517 (fig.137).¹⁷⁰ This is possibly a portrait of a woman named Agatha, cast in the guise of the saint for the purposes of the painting, in the tradition of Giorgione, with the Venetian landscape behind and the parapet in the foreground. Or it may simply be an erotic painting of an anonymous courtesan, given the persona of the saint to lend some respectability.

In any case, great attention is given to the sensuality of the picture, in the simulated texture of the materials and tiny details such as the fine hair across the woman's brow. Although the woman holds a martyr's palm the import of this painting is clearly secular and religious content has become secondary. This is reiterated in another portrait of a woman, either in the guise of Agatha or whose name was Agatha, by Sebastiano del Piombo, dating to the early 1530s (fig.138).¹⁷¹ In this work the identifying attribute of breasts on a plate has been relegated to a dim background. Possibly, in this case, this is a respectable woman who would not like to imply that it is her breasts sitting on a plate for all the world to see.

Conclusion.

In art of all types, not only in Italy but across Europe, between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, numerous women were depicted suffering torture and murder and these images of suffering often included some type of breast iconography. The breasts of some women were hacked at, others were stabbed, many

¹⁷⁰Penny, 2004, 36-39.

¹⁷¹Lucco and Volpe, 1980, 119.



fig.137 Giovanni Basi, (called Cariani), *St. Agatha*, 1517, Edinburgh, National Gallery.



fig.138 Sebastiano del Piombo, *A Woman or St. Agatha*, 1530s, London, National Gallery.



fig.139 Master of the Stratonice Cassoni, Detail of *St. Agatha* from *Virgin Enthroned*, 15th century, Birmingham, Atlanta, Museum of Art, Kress Collection.



fig.140 Anon, *St. Christine of Bolsena Entombed with Serpents*, 14th century, Bressanone, S. Giovanni.

simply had their breasts exposed as part of the humiliation of torture. Obviously these were gender specific tortures, but the popularity of the image of female saints suffering this fate from the late Middle Ages through to the High Renaissance does not primarily demonstrate the misogynistic leanings of the cultures which generated such numbers of these images. Paintings of female martyr saints suffering breast torture cannot be categorised as straightforwardly sadistic, voyeuristic or pornographic.

The image of breast torture was intended as a highly positive Christian metaphor, but the fact that the paintings of breast mutilation were products of a society which was structured around and imbued with a religion founded on the concepts of suffering and empathic response to suffering is often underplayed by modern writers. Certainly, a visual portrayal of an attack on a woman's breasts creates an extremely striking image, far more resonant than the depiction of an attack on any other part of her body, even perhaps than of rape. Whilst rape can be seen to represent the destruction of the persona of only a single woman, an attack on the breasts can be seen to represent an attack on the essential element of womankind. But the attack on Agatha's breasts, just like Mary's humble experience of breastfeeding Christ, and Christ's experience, stripped, naked and wounded on the cross, symbolises the power to be gained through suffering and humiliation, a doctrine continually returned to in late mediaeval Christianity.

During the same period when so many images of Agatha were commissioned and executed, even more images of *Maria lactans* and *Caritas* were painted or sculpted, both engaged in the nurturing of humanity via the breast. As an exemplum of the ideal Christian woman who sacrificed her flesh, and in particular her breasts for the love of God, Agatha was associated with the Virgin Mary. *Caritas* was

another persona of the Virgin, who represented not only food and protection to the populace of Italy in the late mediaeval and renaissance period, but also a burning love of God. Through *Caritas*, the symbol of a burning heart was closely connected with a bountiful breast and in this respect she is also closely aligned with saints such as Agatha who suffered a burning pain in the breast for the love of God. An image by the Master of the Stratonice *Cassone*, of Agatha in a group of Saints, holding her amputated breast to her chest, can be compared to contemporary images of Charity and emphasises this association (fig.139).¹⁷² It could also be suggested that the correlation of bread and breasts, found in the local cults of St. Agatha, was not the mistake it has been assumed to be but in fact demonstrates the innate connection of breasts and nourishment and a woman's power to nourish.

When the depiction of the torture of female martyrs' breasts is considered alongside other popular themes of the time, such as *Maria lactans* and *Caritas*, both the ancient nature and the profundity of breast iconography becomes clearer. The strong links drawn between female victims of breast mutilation and these other female characters acknowledges the ancient power and significance of the symbol of the breast. Because of its function of providing love for a baby in actual physical form, the breast represents the wider love women are capable of and can therefore be seen as an external heart or soul. Through the breast women can express love, both earthly and spiritual. Attempts to damage it will fail because it is only an exterior sign of something uniquely feminine locked within both the physical body and the soul.

¹⁷²Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama, Kress Collection, K2067.

The legend of St. Christine of Bolsena, in particular, illustrates the close association and the unifying and ancient nature of breast iconography. St. Christine, yet another virgin martyr, died in the third century under Diocletian.¹⁷³ Her story is the usual catalogue of denial of pagan gods and ingenious types of torture. But what is specifically relevant to this study is an episode in her torture which consists of the saint being shut up with serpents who do not harm her but climb all over her body. The *Golden Legend* states that ‘... the asps clung to her breasts without hurting her.’¹⁷⁴ This scene appears occasionally in art as can be seen in one fresco cycle of the fourteenth century in the cloister of S. Giovanni, Bressanone (fig.140).¹⁷⁵ The strange, apparent reversal of *Maria lactans* images connects the saint not only to Mary but also to personifications of the vice Lust and, of course, to Cleopatra, as well as Isis and older goddesses. In the case of Cleopatra the damage to the breast is self-inflicted and in the final chapters two very different figures who both died by a wound to the breast, will be investigated.

¹⁷³See note 4.

¹⁷⁴Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 387.

¹⁷⁵Kaftal, (*North East Italy*), 1978, 207-212.

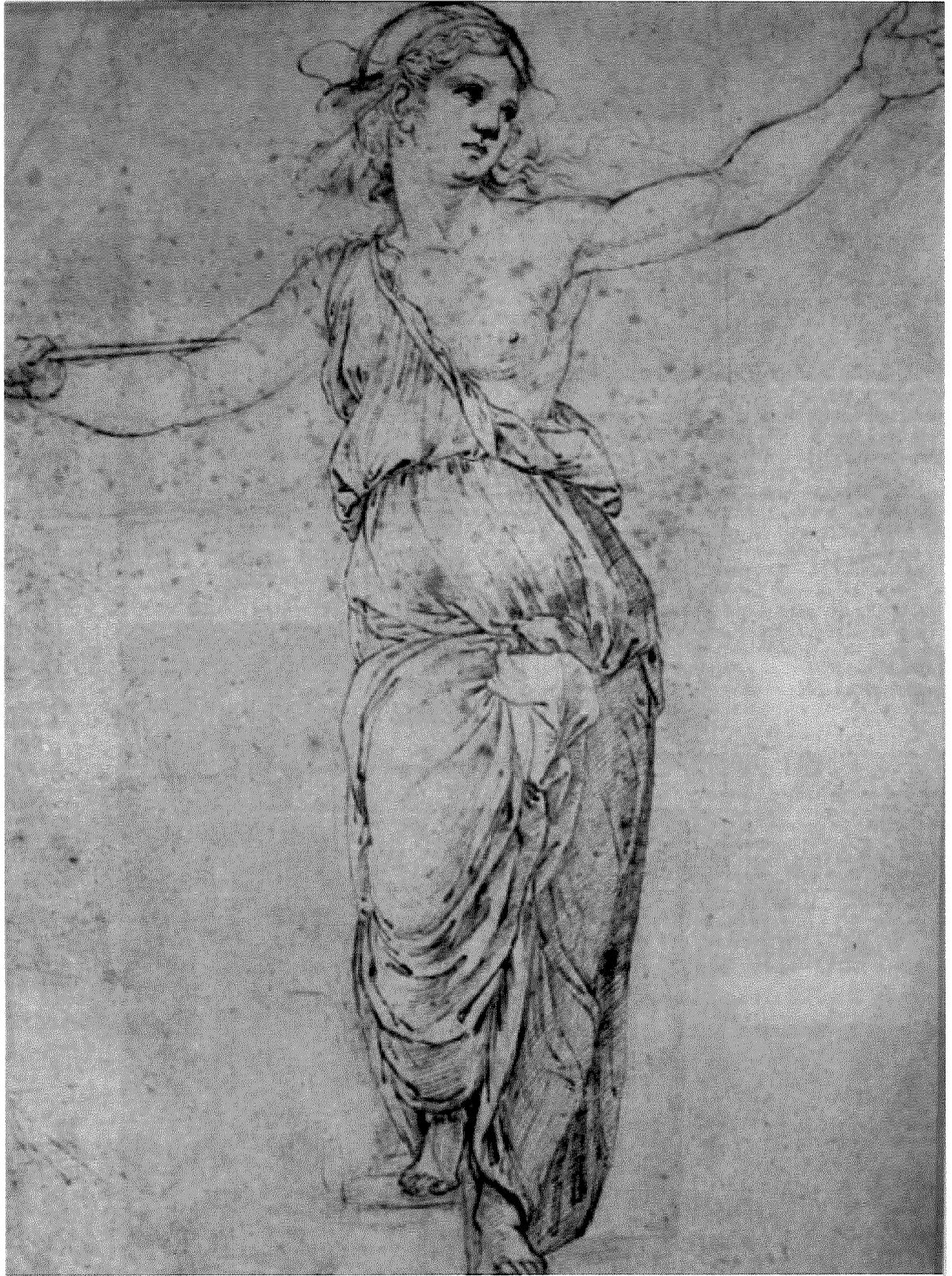


fig.141 Raphael, *Lucretia*, c1510, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Private Collection.

Chapter Four: Lucretia.

Around 1510 Raphael made a drawing of a beautiful woman, standing upright, with her arms opened wide, holding a dagger which points straight at the nipple of her uncovered breast (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, fig.141).¹ This woman represents the Roman matron Lucretia, who suffered rape and committed suicide, and many such images of her were made in the *Cinquecento*. The oldest sources for the life of Lucretia do not indicate that her breast was the target of her dagger, nor even that it was uncovered at the time of her death, yet many artists of the sixteenth century clearly felt that the breast was the natural site for her to inflict her death wound. While not as explicit as the breast iconography of the previous three chapters, this again indicates that the use female breast in art is never straightforward, communicates multiple messages and forms links and associations between the female subjects of such images.

The story of the Roman wife Lucretia, who was the inspiration for the foundation of the Roman republic, was a widely popular subject with writers throughout the late Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Baroque across Europe. From the time of the earliest surviving documentation, dating to the first century BC, the story underwent many manifestations and the subtly differing emphases in the rewritings denote changing moral codes and attitudes to women as well as differing socio-political contexts.

During the *Trecento* and *Quattrocento* Lucretia was represented in Italian art rarely. When she was depicted it was almost always on furniture, in the decoration of

¹Stock, 1984, 423-427; Pon, 2004, 95-98.

cassoni (large chests for holding clothing) or *spallieri* (painted panels which hung all round the walls of a room at shoulder height), where she was deployed as both a Christian and a political emblem. From the start of the *Cinquecento* paintings of Lucretia proliferated and instead of narratives, larger single-episode images became fashionable. The areas of her story which most interested artists of the sixteenth century were the suicide and the actual rape scene, neither of which had been dealt with graphically before. Although initially inspired by a humanist desire for classicised art and an interest in human reaction to experiences of extreme stress and emotion, these crucial moments of the narrative afforded artists the opportunity to depict their subject in varying stages of undress, and eroticism was an important element in many paintings.

The pairing of two motifs in many images makes the figure of Lucretia relevant in the context of this thesis; her uncovered breast and a knife which is about to be, or has been, plunged into the breast. Breast iconography is used, with all the implications of the motif previously discussed, to convey highly complex messages. Lucretia's is a figure which vacillates between extremes, Christian saint and pagan adulteress, and this ambiguity is suitably underlined by the uncovering of her breast.

In several instances in the preceding chapters it has been suggested that the female breast was used as an exterior symbol of the female heart: as a conduit of the many types of love and nourishment which spring from that source. This was true in images of *Maria lactans* and breastfeeding Charity. It was also true of Agatha who suffered the removal of her external breast, but not damage to her inner breast or heart. In the case of Lucretia it is again true: through the sexual violence of a male she loses her chastity, and the rape can be seen as an attack on her essential self or

her heart. The rape was often signified in early depictions by the exposure of her breasts. Paradoxically Lucretia mimics the sexual assault by plunging a dagger into her breast and thereby regains her virtue. This chapter will be an attempt to explore these convoluted concepts.

The literature on Lucretia is vast. Because her story has been retold many times in so many forms, academics from many disciplines have a legitimate interest in her divergent incarnations. In recent years she has drawn attention from numerous writers as a woman who has been subject to the misogynist machinations of every era of the past. It is hard, then, to get a clear image of her. When considering the tradition of visual depictions of Lucretia and its development between 1300 and 1600, it is important to remember that because of the continual retelling of her tale from classical times, her story was embedded within the culture, so much so that it is unlikely that any recourse to original literary sources was needed by an artist before he started work. However, the changing nature of the literary sources must be borne in mind when considering the changing manner of depicting Lucretia in art.

Early Written Sources.

According to Livy, writing during the reign of Augustus, Lucretia lived around 500 BC and was the wife of Collatinus, one of the first consuls of the Republic of Rome; indeed it was because of Lucretia's rape and subsequent suicide that the Republic came into existence in the first place.² The story starts with an incident during the siege of Ardea when Collatinus is drinking with the sons of the last Etruscan King of Rome and the subject of wives comes up. Each man claims

²Livy, *Early History of Rome*, 1960 ed., 1, 57-60.

that his own wife is superior and Collatinus suggests that they ride to Rome, although it is late at night, in order to acquire proof of their wives' conduct in their absence. All the wives are discovered to be engaged in revelries, apart from Lucretia who, despite the lateness of the hour, is industriously spinning. Collatinus is thus the victor in the competition. However, he has made a fatal mistake in boasting about and then displaying his wife, for the King's son, Tarquin (Sextus Tarquinius), has become enamoured of her.

Tarquin subsequently returns to her home, accompanied only by a servant, and is entertained by Lucretia both as a kinsman and a prince. After the household retires to bed he makes his way to Lucretia's room determined to have his way with her. Initially Tarquin tries to seduce Lucretia but when she withstands his advances he threatens her with death and dishonour, promising to place the naked body of a servant by her corpse so that it would be thought they had been caught in the act of adultery. The fear of the shame that this event would bring on her husband and all her family forces Lucretia to acquiesce to his sexual demands. The next day, however, she summons her father and husband, who arrive with companions Brutus and Valerius Publicola, and tells them what happened, declaring that Tarquin's 'pleasure will be my death and his too if you are men.'³ Despite the protestations of the men, Lucretia then insists that: '... I am innocent of fault, but I will take my punishment. Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve,' whereupon she stabs herself with a dagger hidden in her robe.⁴

³Livy, *Early History of Rome*, 1960 ed.,1, 59.

⁴Livy, *Early History of Rome*, 1960 ed.,1, 59.

Collatinus' friend Brutus has been pretending to be an imbecile in order to escape the notice of his wicked kinsmen, the Tarquins, known for murdering any members of their family perceived as threats, but after Lucretia's death he astonishes everyone by grabbing the dagger and swearing to avenge her and rid Rome of the tyrannical rule of the Tarquins. By displaying Lucretia's dead body to the citizens of Rome, Brutus and her family inspire revolt, the Tarquins are routed and the Republic is established.

This story was recorded in several instances in the first century BC.⁵ Livy's sources were the now completely lost Roman annalists of the third and second centuries BC. His Greek contemporary, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, relates the story in his *Roman Antiquities* and cites the Greek third century BC historian Q. Fabius Pictor.⁶ This source is also lost, but explains the small differences between Livy and Dionysius.⁷ According to Dionysius, Tarquin already knew Lucretia very well when he went to Collatia with the intention of raping her; Lucretia travelled to Rome to inform her father of the crime and committed suicide in front of a large gathering of witnesses which, however, did not include her husband. Another contemporary Greek, Diodorus of Sicily, appears to follow the same source in a brief mention of the story in his *Greek Library of History*.⁸

The Roman poet Ovid retells the story at length in his *Fasti*, written in the first decade of the first millennium.⁹ Valerius Maximus, Seneca, Florus, Plutarch,

⁵See Young, 1964, 59-74 for a full list of sources. Also Galinsky, 1932, Donaldson, 1982 and Bowen, 1986, for extensive analysis of sources.

⁶Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1939 Loeb ed., 4, 64-82.

⁷Young, 1964, 64-65.

⁸Young, 1964, 64.

⁹Ovid, *Fasti*, 1995 ed., 2, 725-852.

Dio Cassius and Eutopius all make references to Lucretia in the next three hundred years.¹⁰ While Valerius Maximus and Seneca praise her for her virtues, the others include her in Roman histories, all following the earlier sources without much variation.

Once into the Christian period her story was taken up by the Christian Fathers. Tertullian in the second century, St. Jerome and St. Augustine in the fourth, all addressed the moral implications of Lucretia's tale.¹¹ Both Tertullian and St. Jerome championed her and held her up as a symbol of chastity; a virtue which was increasingly important to Christians who aimed to lead exemplary lives.¹² While Roman men wanted their wives to be faithful to them so that their family line remained pure, Christians laid great stress on chastity as a spiritual virtue. And Lucretia's wish to remain chaste meant that she could be held up as an 'earthly saint'.¹³

St. Augustine, in his *City of God*, however, is uncompromising in his condemnation of Lucretia's suicide.¹⁴ For him the horrors which afflict the body were ultimately trivial, trials sent to be endured. In Augustine's time Rome had been raided by Goths and many nuns had chosen to live after suffering rape, it thus

¹⁰Young, 1964, 70-74.

¹¹Tertullian, *Exhortation à la Chasteté*, 1985 ed., 13,1-3; St. Jerome, 'Against Jovinianus', in *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, 1983, 1, 386; St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 1972 ed., 1, 1, 19.

¹²Tertullian, *Exhortation à la Chasteté*, 1985 ed., 13, 1-3; St. Jerome, 'Against Jovinianus', in *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, 1983, 1, 386.

¹³Shakespeare, 'The Rape of Lucretia', 1964 ed., line 85.

¹⁴St Augustine, *The City of God*, 1972 ed., 1,1,19.

became important to stress that a woman had not sinned if she had been raped against her will.¹⁵

It has been argued that the main difference between the Christian and Roman conceptions of Lucretia stems from the change from a shame-based moral code to a guilt-based moral code.¹⁶ To the Romans it would have been clear that Lucretia's suicide was driven by the fear of bringing shame to her family, not by feelings of guilt, the issue of whether or not she was guilty, either of acquiescing to the rape or of, in fact, enjoying it, was not relevant. To Augustine, however, this was a highly important matter. For Christians sinning is a matter of will, something that happens in the mind not the body. If Lucretia's conscience was clear then she had not sinned and whatever was said about her she had a duty to live. For Roman Catholics only God has the right to take away life and suicide is seen as an act of murder. As far as Augustine was concerned, such an extreme act as suicide suggested possible guilt: "If she is an adulteress why is she commended? If chaste, why did she kill herself?"¹⁷ The act of suicide was wrong and indicated that Lucretia was guilty, at best, of being filled with pride and too concerned for her honour, at worst of adultery.

Lucretia's story was carried through the early mediaeval period by historians such as Jordanes in the sixth century and Odo of Cluny in the tenth and she also figured in Ballads of the early Middle Ages.¹⁸ Despite Augustine's condemnation, in the centuries following and up to the early Renaissance, Lucretia appeared in

¹⁵Donaldson, 1982, 29-30.

¹⁶Donaldson, 1982, 33; Bryson, 1986, 165.

¹⁷St Augustine, *The City of God*, 1972 ed., 1,1,19.

¹⁸Young, 1964, 74-79.

literature as a simple historical figure, either with no particular judgement passed on her, or as an emblem of chastity. In the late Middle Ages she was taken up as a tool for both sides of the debate which was conducted across Europe as to the nature of women - the '*querelle des femmes*'.¹⁹ Those who saw women as the inferior sex assured their readers that women such as Lucretia did not exist any longer, as in Guillaume de Lorris' *Romance of the Rose*.²⁰ Alternatively, Christine de Pizan, in her defence of women in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, held Lucretia up as proof that women do not enjoy rape.²¹

In Italian mediaeval texts also, Lucretia appears in a positive light. In the *Gesta Romanorum*, written for the use of preachers at the end of the *Duecento*, many pagan stories were recorded and given a Christian application, a common practice at the time. The writer records Lucretia's story following Livy and then states: 'My beloved, Lucretia is the soul; Sextus is the devil and the castle represents the heart into which he enters. The sword is penitence.'²² Dante places Lucretia in the Inferno because she was not Christian, but in the company of the most illustrious pagans, such as Plato, Socrates and Seneca.²³ Petrarch visualises her as a personification of chastity in his *Triumph of Chastity over Love* and in his poem *Africa* he tells her tale in full and focuses on the political implications of the story.²⁴ Boccaccio also narrated Lucretia's story in his *De claris mulieribus* and praised her extravagantly.²⁵

¹⁹Jaffé, 1993, 144-145.

²⁰Young, 1964, 79.

²¹Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1983 ed., bk 2, 44,1, 160; bk 2, 64, 2, 207. See Wolfthal, 1999, 142-144.

²²*Gesta Romanorum*, 1905 ed., 135.

²³Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 1993 ed., Canto 4, 128.

²⁴Petrarch, 'Trionfi' in *Rime, Trionfi e Poesie Latine*, 1951, 513, line 132; Petrarch, *Africa*, 1977 ed., 3, lines 823-1023.

²⁵Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 1963 ed., 46, 101-103.

Up until the fifteenth century Lucretia remained a virtuous figure in most of the literature which referred to her and it was as an exemplar that she initially gained popularity in art.²⁶

The Legend in Furniture Decoration.

In the late *Trecento* in Italy it began to be fashionable to decorate household furniture, such as *cassoni* and *spallieri* with painted figures or reliefs made of built-up gilded gesso.²⁷ Although huge numbers of *cassoni* must have been made over the years only a few hundred have survived until today and many are very badly damaged.²⁸

From an early date narratives of the life of Lucretia were common subject matter on *cassone* panels and she also appeared in series of virtue-personifications and heroes and heroines.²⁹ Examples dating from the late decades of the *Trecento* through to the early *Quattrocento*, which have been identified as depicting scenes from the life of Lucretia, can be found in the Muzeum Narodowe in Warsaw, the

²⁶For an analysis of the attitudes of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio to suicide see Rolfs, 1979, 200-225. Although repelled by suicide, as Christians of their era had to be, they also accepted the taking of one's life in particular circumstances; for instance, if the natural laws of love had been transgressed.

²⁷Baskins, 1998, 4. For an example of Lucretia on a *Spalliere* panel, see the 1490s depiction of three heroic women by Ercole di' Roberti, possibly for Eleanora of Aragon, Duchess of Ferrara (Estense, Modena Galeria). Such series of exemplary women were fashionable at this time and often included Lucretia. See Manca, 1992, 61; Wilkins Sullivan; 1994; Penny, 2004, 81.

²⁸Miziolek, 1996(a), 31, note 1; Baskins, 1998, 5.

²⁹See Schubring, 1923, 484 for page references to *cassoni* with narratives of the life of Lucretia. In his *Barokthemen*, Pigler lists around twenty instances on surviving *cassoni*, see Pigler, 1956, 2, 389-390, for a good but not complete list of paintings of Lucretia on *cassoni*.

Galleria Nazionale delle Marche in Urbino, the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum in Zurich and in the Hearst Collection in San Simeon, California (figs 142-145).³⁰ All four of these depict the scene of Lucretia about to stab herself in the breast and the banishment of the Tarquins from Rome. The Zurich and San Simeon panels also include Tarquin stealing into Lucretia's bedroom. Other common episodes from the life of Lucretia found on *cassone* panels were the siege at Ardea, the ride to test the wives, the feast at Collatia, and the death of Tarquin at Gabii.³¹

Much has been written on the use of the story of Lucretia in the *Quattrocento*, both as a moral exemplar and as a political emblem.³² In her progressive study of Italian domestic furniture painting, Cristelle Baskins has examined how the image of Lucretia gave mixed messages; that Lucretia was a 'pictorial object both of praise and blame' and that no one iconographic or contextual interpretation of images of Lucretia is valid.³³ Baskins also argues that in these images Lucretia's voice was silenced while her inevitably eroticised body became the means of communication. Baskins does not mention, however, how the motif of the breast was used to express these blurred, contradictory and multiple meanings. Lucretia's story certainly has an undeniable sexual accent, centring as it does on the rape of a woman, but the use of the woman's breast to distil her story bridges the mixed messages she conveys and is not unambiguously sexualised.

³⁰This is a random sample, not a comprehensive list. The whereabouts of many examples are unknown. For images of several of these see Schubring, 1923, 484; Miziolek, 1996(a); and Baskins, 1998, 128-159.

³¹Miziolek, 1996(a), 45-50.

³²For the creation of exemplary figures during the early Renaissance see Ajmar, 2000, 244-264 and see also Tinagli, 2000, 265-284 for their use on marriage furnishings.

³³Baskins, 1998, 158-159.

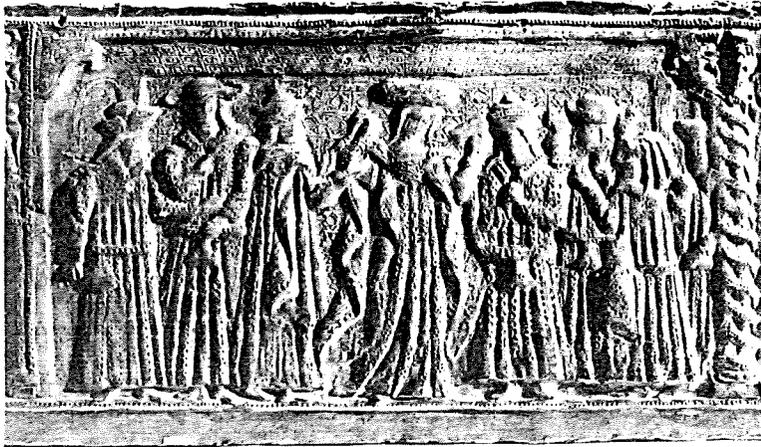


fig.142 Cassone, detail, *The Death of Lucretia*, Warsaw, Muzeum Narodowe.

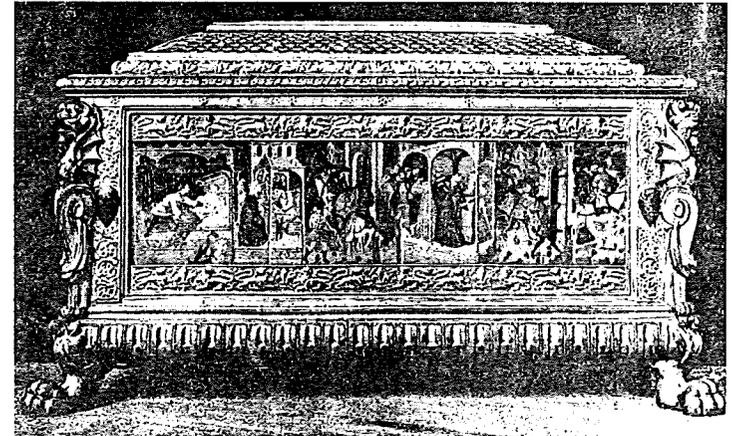


fig.145 Cassone, *The Story of Lucretia*, Zurich, Schweizerisches

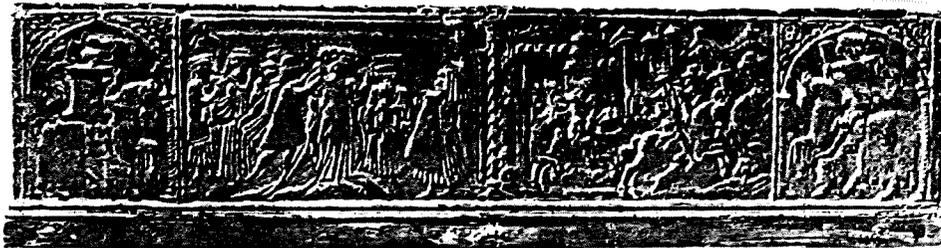


fig.143 Cassone, *The Story of Lucretia*, Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche.



fig.144 Cassone, *The Story of Lucretia*, San Simeon, California, Hearst Collection.

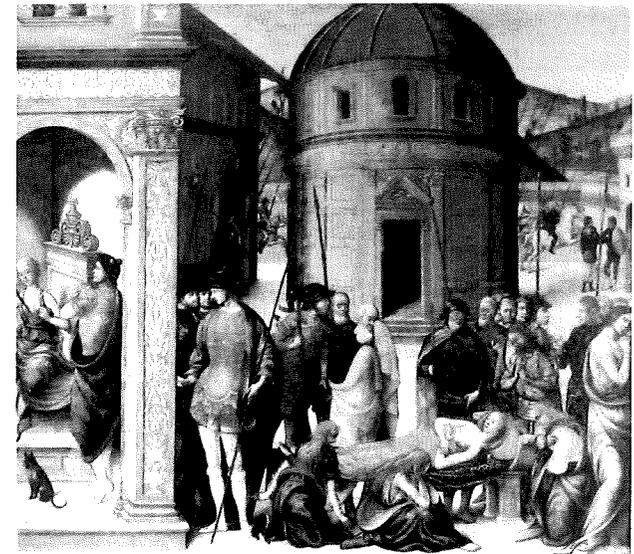


fig.146 Biagio di Antonio, panel, *The Story of Lucretia*, 1480s, Venice, Ca'd'Oro.

Although in the depictions of Lucretia found on domestic furniture she generally does not bare her breasts before plunging in the dagger, her breasts do appear in some narratives on *cassone* panels. In the Zurich and San Simeon panels mentioned above, in the scenes where Tarquin prepares to molest Lucretia, she is shown sitting up in bed exposing her breasts. A sign that something highly inappropriate is about to happen and of Lucretia's innocence and vulnerability, this surprised nakedness recalls the involuntary exposure of Christian martyrs, perhaps particularly St. Agatha, whose torture focused on her breasts. Lucretia's naked breasts symbolise the harm which is to be done to her and while the subsequent wound to that very area of her body may have been self-inflicted, it was made necessary by the sexual violence of Tarquin. A 1480s panel by Biagio di Antonio, (Venice, Ca'd'Oro) also includes the exposure of Lucretia's breasts as she lies dead on the bier (fig.146). This intensifies the poignancy of the scene and reiterates Lucretia's continuing innocence and the harm done to her. The connection between the rape and the entry of the dagger is made clear by the writer Lorenzo Valla, whose 1450 text, *De Voluptate*, demands of Lucretia 'Why do you reopen with your own hands the wound that you have received?'³⁴

In light of the praise given to Lucretia by writers such as Boccaccio in the late Middle Ages, it is not hard to explain why she should be a preferred character for household decoration. In his version of the legend of Lucretia, Boccaccio describes her as 'the outstanding model of Roman chastity and sacred glory of ancient virtue', and declares that 'she cleansed her shame harshly, and for this reason she should be exalted with worthy praise for her chastity, which can never be

³⁴Cited in Baskins, 1998, 130.

sufficiently lauded'.³⁵ Similarly, around 1390 Coluccio Salutati, the Florentine chancellor, wrote a short work entitled *Declamatio Lucretiae* which explores Lucretia's emotions at the point of suicide and ends with an almost exact quotation from Livy's story of Lucretia: 'Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve'.³⁶

Pairs of *cassoni* were generally commissioned by the family of a groom for his new wife to transport her dowry from her old home to her new, after which they held pride of place in bedchambers.³⁷ Similarly *spallieri* were often commissioned to decorate the nuptial chamber of a newly wedded couple. The figure of Lucretia would serve to remind the new wife of ideal womanly virtues: chastity and the willingness to put the honour of the family to whom she belongs before anything else, even her life.³⁸ Despite the Christian interdict against suicide, the premium placed on female sexual continence ensured that the most important element of Lucretia's story in the late Middle Ages was her desire for chastity. The small Italian city states of the Middle Ages tended to be structurally dependent on family dynasties, in a way very similar to Republican Rome, and family honour was an extremely important factor in the operation of society.³⁹ An unchaste wife could

³⁵Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 1963 ed., 46, 101-103.

³⁶Coluccio Salutati, *Declamatio Lucretiae*, translated in Jed, 1989, 149-152.

³⁷Baskins, 1998, 4-5; Miziolek, 1996(a), 33, note 2.

³⁸Barriault, 1994, 124-132; Miziolek, 1996(a), 50.

³⁹See Lerner, 1980, 102-104 for blood feuds, family honour, family dynasties and the importance of marriage ties during the late Middle Ages. The character of Lucretia was originally a moral exemplar constructed by Livy in a period of moral corruption in Rome. There was little difference in Roman law and thinking between rape and adultery in the case of a married woman - both brought irredeemable shame to the husband - the wife was tainted, contaminated by foreign seed whether she had been acquiescent or not. However, by committing suicide Lucretia purged the stain. The Roman moral code rested on family honour and the maxim 'better death than dishonour', as well as revenge, was what motivated Lucretia, for only by death could

bring shame and ruin to her family, and this is one reason why Lucretia became popular as an exemplar in the *Trecento* and *Quattrocento*.

Because of the Christianised view taken towards Lucretia in texts such as the *Gesta Romanorum*, it was possible to represent her as a pseudo-Christian saint. The alignment of her virtuous character with real Christian martyrs is suggested in the scenes of Lucretia's death where she stands holding the dagger by which she will die as if it were an attribute, and is underlined by the accompanying personifications of virtues which often flank the narrative scenes, as in the Warsaw panel for instance, which includes personifications of Strength and Justice.⁴⁰ Just like many of the female Christian martyrs in, for example, the *Golden Legend*, whose deaths resulted from a refusal to give in to the lusts of a male pagan figure of authority, Lucretia dies in order to retain her chastity.

Lucretia, and not a Christian saint, may have been chosen for the nuptial decorations because, despite her virtuous character, she was a wife, who could legitimately enjoy sexual relations with her husband. As discussed in Chapter Three, very few female saints were married, and most of those who were expended much energy on persuading their husbands to agree to abstinence from sex within the marriage, so much did the early chroniclers of the saints' lives esteem chastity.⁴¹ Patrons of *cassoni* and *spallieri* did not want to influence the new wife against consummating her marriage and providing an heir to continue the family line, they simply wanted to encourage her to remain faithful to her husband, exactly as

she expiate the shame she had unwittingly brought to her whole family, see Donaldson, 1982, 23-25; Jaffé, 1993, 151.

⁴⁰Baskins, 1998, 131.

⁴¹Abou-El-Haj, 1984, 27.

Lucretia had wanted to be. Other imagery which would encourage the young couple to engage in lovemaking can be found on many *cassoni*, although it is sometimes coyly hidden. For instance, images of naked reclining Venus can be found inside many of the lids, sometimes accompanied by Mars.⁴² In addition, naked dolls representing David were often placed inside, to excite the young wife.⁴³

This very secular function of the imagery explains why New Testament scenes figure very rarely on *cassoni*, the emphasis of the Gospels and the early Church fathers tending towards abstinence and lives of penitence, self-denial and sacrifice. Great emphasis was placed, in Catholic dogma, on the fact that Mary remained a Virgin all her life, despite giving birth. Pagan and Old Testament characters, on the other hand, were often sexually active, David being a case in point.⁴⁴

However, for the Romans in Livy's period the import of Lucretia's narrative was mainly political; whether or not it is historically veracious, the legend neatly ties up the founding of their Republic. It links the private and public worlds, showing how the intimate tyranny of the younger Tarquin had great ramifications for the

⁴²Goffen, 1997, 151.

⁴³Baskins, 1993, 113-34.

⁴⁴It is important to note also that Lucretia's is not the only story of sexual violence which was popular subject matter for *cassoni* decoration; the rape of the Sabine women is another example. It has been suggested that such imagery can be seen to refer to the triumph of men over women in the marriage bed and was an endorsement of the sexual hierarchy, see Wofford, 1992, 196. But perhaps it also has something to do with religious indoctrination; a good Catholic girl should have to be more or less raped before giving up her virginity, but once the deed is done, within the marriage bed of course, she becomes devoted to her husband, as did the Sabine women, who stopped their fathers taking revenge on their behalf, see Livy, *Early History of Rome*, 1960 ed., 1, 9-13.

public tyranny of his father the King.⁴⁵ Lucretia thus becomes a symbol of Rome, violated by tyrants.⁴⁶ This political import is emphasised by the fact that the section on Brutus, and his actions to expel the Tarquins after Lucretia's death, is as long as the section leading up to and including the rape and the subsequent suicide scene.

The political implications of Lucretia's story were well understood in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Petrarch's conclusion of the tale in his poem *Africa* includes the judgement 'Such was the end of kings. Then better times ensued; our age of liberty began'.⁴⁷ At the end of the *Quattrocento* Machiavelli, with a characteristically different slant on Lucretia, wrote in his *Discourses* :

'... women have been the cause of many troubles, have done great harm to those who govern cities, and have caused in them many divisions. [In like manner] we read in Livy's history that the outrage done to Lucretia deprived the Tarquins of their rule.'⁴⁸

Because the structure of society was built around family dynasties, and because the most powerful families formed the governments of the late mediaeval Italian city states, the political and private worlds were closely connected and such a seemingly private matter as marriage had political implications. The marriages of members of the wealthier classes did not result from romantic ties but were arranged in order to strengthen family allegiances, to be economically advantageous and to

⁴⁵Keuls, 1992, 145.

⁴⁶Donaldson, 1982, 7-10. See Balsdon, 1962 and Pomeroy, 1973, for information on the lives of women during the Classical period.

⁴⁷Petrarch, *Africa*, 1977 ed., lines 984-985.

⁴⁸Machiavelli, *The Discourses of Nicolò Machiavelli*, 1950 ed., 3, 26, 2.

secure the grip on government which these families had.⁴⁹ The decoration on *cassoni* and other items commissioned for the celebration of marriages also celebrates the success of such political alliances. Lucretia, because she represented a woman who put family honour before her life, was a suitable figure to appear in these decorations. In addition, the revenge wreaked on Tarquin in scenes of his expulsion and death expressed the inevitable results of transgressing the codes around which society was built. Tarquin's crime was not simply one of sexual deviance; because he was related to Lucretia's husband and because he appeared in the role of a guest in order to achieve his aim, he transgressed the code of family ties and hospitality. Not only he himself suffered the punishment for this, but also all his family, who lost dominion over Rome.

But the depictions of the story of Lucretia on *cassone* panels may have had even wider political significance. Generally, *cassoni* were not signed or dated and so it is very difficult to trace them to their workshops of origin. However, in his article concerning the *cassone* panel in the Warsaw museum, J. Miziolek argues that several of the earliest surviving *cassoni* which show scenes from the legend of Lucretia (particularly those which are framed by images of personifications of virtues) appear, from stylistic evidence, to originate from the same workshop, most likely situated in or close to the commune of Florence and in operation during the first half of the *Quattrocento*.⁵⁰ Can it be a coincidence that Lucretia first became popular in a town which, at that time, prided itself so highly on its political independence?

⁴⁹Baskins, 1998, 5; Wofford, 1992, 196-198.

⁵⁰Miziolek, 1996(a), 49.

Independent city states such as Florence and Siena faced the threat of aggressive invasion from duchies or monarchies such as Milan and Naples throughout the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. The continual struggle to retain independence resulted in repeated military clashes and this fight for liberty is reflected in the narrative scenes from the life of Lucretia on *cassone* panels which portray the expulsion of Tarquin's family from Rome and his death, the events which liberated Rome from tyranny.⁵¹ These narrative episodes were given as much emphasis and space as the scenes of rape and suicide. In the Warsaw panel the scene of the expulsion of the Tarquins clearly marks out the fleeing king with a large crown, this figure symbolises tyranny, defeated by the champions of liberty. And because bedrooms were used as public spaces in the daytime during the *Quattrocento*, these politically charged images on domestic furniture would have been seen by far more people than just the family and would, therefore, have had a wider function, expressing patriotic allegiance and, by their allusion to the institution of the Roman republic, the desire for freedom from tyranny of the fifteenth-century city states.

Taking all this into account, the Florentine political imagery which appears on a panel executed by Botticelli, or a close follower, around 1500 is not surprising (fig.147).⁵² This painting, now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, conflates three scenes from the story of Lucretia; on the left the attack of Tarquin; on

⁵¹An examination of the huge documentation of *cassone* panels, made by Schubring early this century, shows that battle scenes generally, for example the *Triumph of David*, were very popular subject matter.

⁵²In his monograph on Botticelli, Lightbown stated that this panel was by Botticelli but this has been brought into question more recently, see Lightbown, 1989, 260-269; Penny, 2004, 81. For the political content this and other such panels see Walton, 1965; Hendy, 1974, 38-41; Miziolek, 1996(b); Baskins 1998, 132.



fig.147 Botticelli (workshop), panel, *The Story of Lucretia*, c1500, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

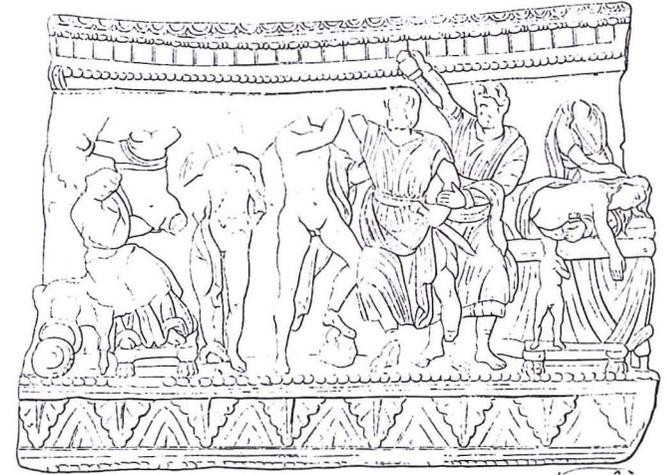


fig.149 Etruscan Funerary Urn, *The Story Of Lucretia?* 1st century BC, Volterra 499. (After BrKII, pl. CIII, no.1)

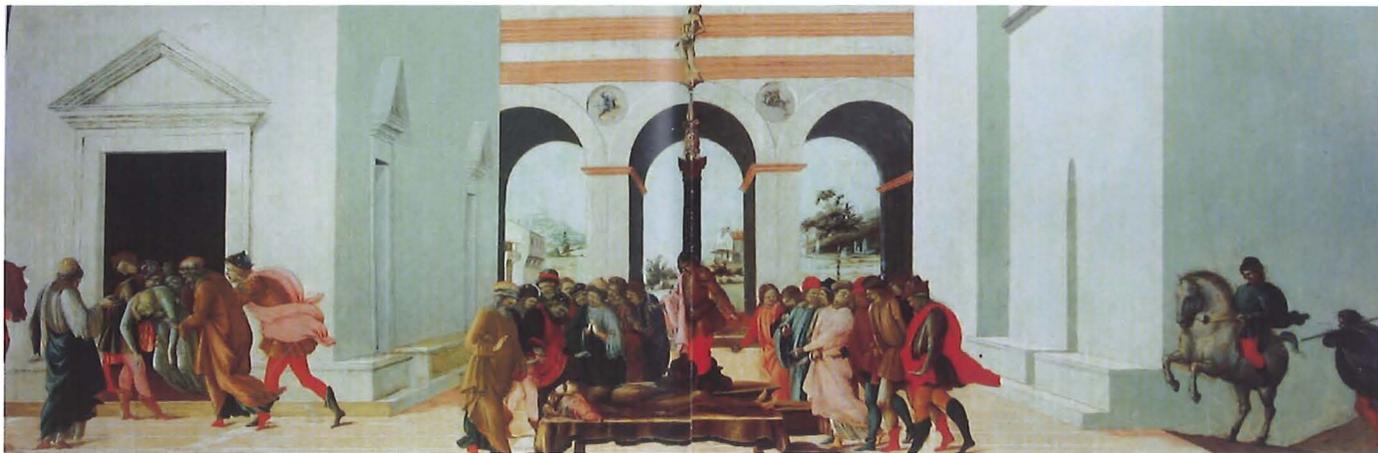


fig.148 Filippino Lippi, panel, *The Story of Lucretia*, c1485, Florence, Palazzo Pitti.

the right, the suicide of Lucretia; and in the middle Lucretia with knife still sticking into her breast, lying on a funeral pyre with a crowd of armed citizens around her, preparing to revolt and exact revenge for her death. The scene is set against a triumphal arch covered in classicised relief sculpture.⁵³

It is believed that Botticelli, or whoever created this panel, followed a design, perhaps used many times, but certainly employed in the creation of a panel some fifteen years before, now in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence and attributed to Filippino Lippi (fig. 148).⁵⁴ Both panels include a fictive sculpture of the Old Testament character David, standing on a high plinth prominently in the middle of the scene of Lucretia's death. This detail is obviously anachronistic: a Judeo-Christian hero would not have been around in pagan Rome. David was, however, a hero whom Florentines of the *Quattrocento* very much identified with. In the continuing warfare with Milan, a much larger and stronger military force, Florence could visualise itself as the small, weak victor over the giant Goliath and during the course of the fifteenth century several sculptures of the Old Testament figure were displayed in prominent locations within Florence, culminating of course with Michelangelo's gigantic marble hero at the end of the century.⁵⁵ The appearance of the figure of David in the two *cassone* panels therefore seems unlikely to be a coincidence and the inclusion, in

⁵³Lightbown, 1989, 268.

⁵⁴Lightbown, 1989, 261.

⁵⁵In 1408 Donatello was commissioned to sculpt a marble *David* for an exterior buttress of the Duomo, and this statue was subsequently acquired by the *signoria* and displayed in the Palazzo Vecchio. The political setting and the patriotic inscription 'To those who fight bravely for the fatherland the gods lend aid even against the most terrible foes', resulted in the figure of David becoming intimately associated with the city of Florence in the ensuing decades. Donatello's first sculpture was followed by his bronze *David* around 1430 (which apparently had an even more explicitly political inscription) and Verrocchio's bronze in the 1460s, see Bennet and Wilkins, 1984, 66; Sperling, 1992, 218-224.

the later panel, of a sculpted relief of a scene from the tale of Judith, another heroine of the Florentine state, makes it even more likely that these panels held some political significance.⁵⁶

The appearance of David and Judith in a Florentine work of art dating to the last decade of the *Quattrocento* is even more politically charged by the events of the 1490s. In the second half of the *Quattrocento* all the governmental bodies of Florence had become increasingly controlled by one family, the Medici. Donatello's sculpture of *Judith* had been commissioned by the Medici family and positioned in the courtyard of their new Palazzo, and whether or not they originally commissioned it, his bronze *David* had certainly been acquired by them by 1469 and also positioned in the courtyard.⁵⁷ When the Medici were expelled in the early 1490s, both these statues were confiscated by the Florentine government and placed in prominent positions in the political heart of the city outside the Palazzo Vecchio.⁵⁸ In this way the figures of David and Judith acquired rejuvenated status as symbols of freedom from tyrannical rule. The Botticelli *cassone* panel, painted only a few years after these events, makes the political allegiance of the unknown patron explicitly clear. Lucretia was, like Judith, only a woman, but she freed Rome through her brave actions, and this won her a degree of endorsement in the Florentine state.

⁵⁶Judith, another Old Testament figure who, although only a woman, had defeated a king and saved her people, had also been incorporated into the Florentine self-image by the late *Quattrocento*. This was expressed once more in a sculpture by Donatello dating to the 1460s, which, like the earlier *David*, was endowed with a politically significant inscription, 'Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues; behold the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility', see Bennet and Wilkins, 1984, 83.

⁵⁷Baskins, 1993, 113.

⁵⁸Lightbown, 1989, 269.

Lucretia's body, stretched out in the central scene of the *cassone* panels, with the knife dramatically embedded in her breast, that part of her anatomy which particularly marks her out as a woman, emphasises her sacrifice. Lucretia's sacrifice, made via her breast, links her with the female protagonists discussed in earlier chapters. Mary's sacrifice, in aid of all mankind, was symbolised by the lactation of her breast; and Charity also expressed willingness to put others before herself by the act of breastfeeding. Charity too was, in the *Trecento*, a heavily politicised figure in Florence and to some extent identified with the city; her self-sacrifice was a civic virtue as well as a personal one because just like Lucretia, Charity put community before self. And Agatha was willing to suffer damage to her breast and die so that her chastity would be preserved.

Moreover, by stabbing herself in the breast, Lucretia can be seen to be cutting off, as it were, the source of nourishment for any illegitimate child born as a result of the sexual liaison. Because of the dependence on family dynasty, issues of paternity were vitally important to husbands of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, and a wife bearing another man's child could be disastrous. The fact that this was a serious concern is illustrated in Coluccio Salutati's poem on Lucretia where, when justifying her suicide, she asks: 'What if his unpropitious seed adhered in my womb? Or shall I wait to become a mother from adultery?'⁵⁹ By stabbing herself in the breast Lucretia makes it absolutely clear that she would never allow this to happen. She is, therefore, in some ways the mirror image of *Maria lactans*, whose milk could flow freely.

Judith Still has suggested that the stabbing of the dagger into Lucretia's breast created an eloquent wound, a gift to the people of Rome 'nourishing them so

⁵⁹Coluccio Salutati, *Declamatio Lucretiae*, translation from Jed, 1989, 151.

that they are strong for political freedom'.⁶⁰ She is only able to make this analogy because the wound is so often imagined, by artists and writers alike, to have been inflicted on Lucretia's breast. From the wound flows blood, just as milk flows from the breast, and as noted in previous Chapters, mediaeval and renaissance men of science believed that breastmilk was transmuted blood. Lucretia sacrificed her body and her blood to give freedom to Rome, just as Mary had sacrificed her body and put forth fluid from her breast to give mankind the freedom of eternal life. The breasts are, once more, strong signifiers and draw meaning from various sources.

The Statuesque Lucretia

The depiction of Lucretia's self-immolation was loaded, from the earliest examples, with the implications of other popular breast iconography and this remained true even in the *Cinquecento*, when a sudden change in the manner in which Lucretia was depicted occurred. Although it is hard to pinpoint exactly the very first image which indicates the change, from the first decade of the sixteenth century Lucretia rapidly became transformed from a character who appeared in narratives on household furniture to an appropriate subject for large single-panel paintings, with the attention focused on her, her act of suicide and the intense emotions of the moment.

A great number of examples of this type of image survive and they can be roughly divided into two groups.⁶¹ The first, most common, breaks with the traditional literary sources and shows Lucretia about to commit suicide quite alone,

⁶⁰Still, 1984, 79.

⁶¹Pigler documents around twenty-eight Italian examples executed before 1600, see Pigler, 1956, 2, 386-389

set in various backgrounds, landscapes, exterior architecture, vague interiors and bedrooms. This activates a relationship between Lucretia and the viewer, who becomes the uncomfortable witness of a grief-stricken woman. Because of the much greater size of the single images this is still true, though less powerful, of the second group which remains truer to the sources and includes two or more male attendants at the death scene.

The first group, labelled “Monologues” by W. Stechow, evidently aim to communicate the whole essence of Lucretia’s story in that one shocking image of her with dagger embedded in or aimed at her breast.⁶² This essence is communicated via the analogy of the dagger and the penis; the sight of Lucretia with a threatening, hard, blade pointing at her breast recalling the earlier episode of the rape.⁶³ The weapon also serves to refer to the later episodes where Brutus swears on the dagger to avenge Lucretia and to the subsequent expulsion of the rapist and his family. Much is made of this by modern writers; it has been claimed that the emphasis on the death scene denies the actuality of the rape and shuffles the blame for the tragedy from the male, Tarquin, to the female, Lucretia.⁶⁴ Diane Wolfthal has argued that art and society have pressed home the idea that the ‘proper response to rape is suicide, ... and women will not suffer terribly from this act’.⁶⁵ Neither of these arguments, however, take into account the emotional intensity and turmoil of many of the images and the evident attempt by various artists to condense the entire horrific story into this one climactic moment without losing any of the implications of rape.

⁶²Stechow, 1951, 114-124.

⁶³Goffen, 1997, 202.

⁶⁴Garrard, 1989, 210-214; Emison, 1991, 381.

⁶⁵Wolfthal, 1999, 183.

But why did this sudden change in depiction occur? Stechow argues that the discovery of an antique statue around 1500 in Trastevere, which, rightly or wrongly, was identified as Lucretia, resulted in the change in iconography.⁶⁶ However, we do not know definitely of any antique visual depiction of the story of Lucretia which was available as a model for artists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Indeed the only antique works in existence which may depict the story are three first-century BC Etruscan funerary urns, in museums in Florence and Volterra, and it is likely that these portray a now entirely lost version of the story, rather different from the Roman history which became later became dominant, and depict a negative image of Lucretia.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Stechow, 1951, 117-20, see also Sheard, 1978, no.102; Penny, 2004, 84.

⁶⁷Penny Small, 1976, 349-360. Penny Small tentatively identifies these three small fragments (fig.149). Although quite damaged, the two pieces in Volterra show a dead woman, presumed to be Lucretia, lying on the right, in one case impaled on a dagger. In the centre are a group of three men identified as Collatinus, Brutus and Lucretius, Lucretia's father. Lucretius raises his sword and is restrained from striking a fleeing figure on the left, presumably Tarquin. Between Tarquin and the central group stands a winged figure identified as Venus, the protector of lovers. Also on the left a female figure is seated in a grieving position and she is presumed to represent Lucretia's mother. The fragment in Florence is even more damaged but evidently depicts the same scene. Penny Small points out that in antique narrative sculpture particular motifs were designed to signify more of the story than shown in the single scene and always meant the same thing whenever they were deployed. She identifies the central image in these fragments as one which she calls the 'stopped revenge', a motif which always implies that the fleeing figure will get away without any revenge being exacted on him at any time. As Tarquin's family, the last monarchy of Rome, was Etruscan, art which originates from that area is likely to be biased towards them and not the Roman Republicans or Lucretia in particular, and this may explain why Tarquin is depicted as escaping revenge. According to Livy, all the male members of the story, apart from Lucretia's father, were related to the Tarquins and thus were Etruscan in origin. And so, Penny Small suggests, the Etruscan version of the story may have run along the lines of a family argument over women. Because not being used as a political symbol or a moral exemplar, Lucretia is likely to have conformed more to the traditional classical stereotype of women, on whom the blame for all the evils of the world was generally heaped. The fact that the antique fragments show her uncovered may suggest that here she is not represented as a respectable wife but

Images of this type, therefore, even if they were available and correctly identified in the late Middle Ages, or the Renaissance, are unlikely to have influenced depictions of Lucretia. On the other hand, massive excavations in and around Rome at the beginning of the *Cinquecento* uncovered many antique sculpture fragments and several were misidentified as Lucretia, particularly examples of Venus Genetrix and Amazon sarcophagi, which again demonstrates the confusion of identity which breast iconography creates.⁶⁸ So, although there is no surviving physical evidence, the discovery of a fine, classical, single-figured sculpture assumed to be Lucretia, could explain the appearance of monologic Lucretias and why the literary texts were suddenly ignored and attendants excluded from many scenes of Lucretia's death. Such an event may also explain the poem written by Cardinal Giovanni Medici, later to become Pope Leo X, *in Lucrece Statueum* which praises the statuesque qualities of Lucretia. Indeed a general cult of Lucretia appears to have taken hold in Roman circles at the time.⁶⁹

Dürer, who made a visit to Italy in the early years of the sixteenth century, produced a drawing of Lucretia around 1510 which is quite similar to Raphael's contemporary drawing, mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter (figs 150, 141).⁷⁰ It has been suggested that both these drawings are copies of a now lost antique statue and can give some idea of what it looked like.⁷¹ In each case the female figure is isolated, of monumental size and classical proportions and turns her

as an adulteress who committed suicide when she was spurned by her lover.

⁶⁸Stechow, 1951, 118-120; Sheard, 1978, 57; Stock, 1984, 423-427.

⁶⁹Stechow, 1951, 118.

⁷⁰Stock, 1984, 423-427; Hulst, 1991, 213.

⁷¹Sheard, 1978, 57.

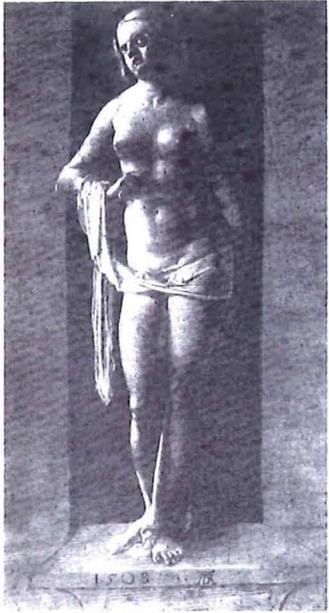


fig.150 Dürer, *The Death of Lucretia*, c1508, Vienna, Albertina.



fig.153 Parmigianino, study, *The Death of Lucretia*, Budapest, Museum.



fig.151 Marcantonio Raimondi, after Raphael, *The Death of Lucretia*, engraving B.XIV. 155, 192, Vienna, Albertina.



fig.154 Enea Vico after Parmigianino, *The Death of Lucretia*, c1530, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Elisha Whittelsey Collection.



fig.152 Antonio Lombardo, *The Death of Lucretia*, c1516, Baltimore, Walters Gallery.

body in a strong contrapposto movement. However, the arms of the two examples are differently positioned. Dürer's Lucretia has already plunged the dagger into her rib-cage and her arms are lowered and relaxed. Raphael's figure raises her arms in a wide sweeping movement, in preparation to strike the fatal blow.⁷² This may indicate that the common model had lost its arms, notoriously the most vulnerable part of a statue buried for 1500 years or more.

Following Raphael's image many Italian painters began to represent Lucretia with the dagger pointing at or actually embedded in the uncovered breast. Other artists, particularly in the north of Europe where they were more likely to be influenced by Dürer, chose to depict Lucretia stabbing herself in what is presumably supposed to be the heart, although in many cases the point of entry looks rather low and nearer the stomach. In a very few cases the wound appears to be in her side. Do these differences of depiction indicate anything in particular? Different sources, or different understandings of the story, or are they completely random aesthetic choices made by the artist? Or do they, in fact, reveal something about renaissance thinking in relation to women and female anatomy?

According to the antique sources, Lucretia died in front of two or more men and no respectable woman would have exposed herself in an unacceptable way under these circumstances. In Raphael's drawing, however, one breast is exposed, the nipple is like a target towards which the dagger points, emphasising both Lucretia's vulnerability and her determined courage. This partial nudity, which contrasts with fifteenth-century *cassone* depictions of the suicide, where Lucretia is almost always fully dressed at the moment of death, may well follow an original

⁷²Stechow, 1951, 122; Sheard, 1978, 57.

statue or simply conform to what was known to be a fashionable type of dress for Roman women and does not indicate any intention to stimulate the viewer sexually. As argued in previous chapters, during the late Middle Ages the exposed breast was an ambivalent image representing motherhood, security and chaste virtuousness and its appearance even in the early decades of the sixteenth century, in the case of a well-known Christianised pagan heroine, would not necessarily have elicited a sexual response.

Livy states that Lucretia stabbed herself in the heart, while Ovid uses the word which best translates as breast.⁷³ But Livy was a historian and Ovid was a poet, his choice of the word breast, in the place of Livy's more scientific heart, can be explained by the different genre of writing, breast perhaps being the more poetic word. A brief survey of the main early Renaissance texts which relate the tale show that the word breast was the term chosen, even in the cases where Livy appears to be the main source.⁷⁴ This is possibly because it presented a more aesthetically or poetically pleasing image and why it was commonly taken up by artists.

It is interesting to note that in the sources there appears to be an emphasis on the fact that Tarquin put his hands on Lucretia's breasts during the rape. Livy, Ovid, Boccaccio and the *Gesta Romanorum*, among others, all mention this. Ovid tells us that 'only her husband had ever touched' her breasts previously, indicating that the moment Tarquin touches her breasts is the moment when he lays claim to another

⁷³Livy, *Early History of Rome*, 1960 ed., 1, 1, 59; Ovid, *Fasti*, 1995 ed., 2, 831.

⁷⁴Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 1963 ed., 46; Petrarch, *Africa*, 1977 ed., line 929-930; Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1983 ed., 2, 44, 1; *Gesta Romanorum*, 1905 ed., 125.

man's property.⁷⁵ In Coluccio Salutati's declamation of Lucretia she demands 'Let me pierce with a sword this breast which that violent one loved, feeling first my nipples with his fingers impressed for the purpose of exciting lust'.⁷⁶ The breast then symbolically represents Tarquin's general crime, his offence against another man, his offence against the woman and the drastic actions she takes as a result. This may be part of the meaning implied by the artists' choice to portray Lucretia stabbing herself in the breast.

It seems clear that symbolically the breast and the heart of a woman were seen to be interchangeable. From a woman's breast pours forth the greatest sign of any human love - the love of a mother for her baby - universally acknowledged to be the most powerful and unconditional love. That a woman is shown choosing to die by inflicting a wound to her breast is highly significant and indicates not only the generally recognised role of women as child-rearers but also the greatness of Lucretia's sacrifice in her suicide. Her breast is the outer symbol of her heart and is the route to her heart. It has been argued that the method of death chosen by Lucretia, and focused on in such *Cinquecento* images, was a masculine one and that daggers were men's tools.⁷⁷ The use of a dagger to stab may be a manly action but the image of a breast, the supreme symbol of womanhood, threatened by or actually assaulted by a knife, is a uniquely feminine one.

Raphael's beautiful drawing appears to be the original from which Marcantonio Raimondi made his equally beautiful engraving soon after first meeting

⁷⁵Ovid, *Fasti*, 1995 ed., 2, 804.

⁷⁶Coluccio Salutati, *Declamatio Lucretiae*, translation from Jed, 1989, 151.

⁷⁷Hults, 1991, 206. See also Loraux, 1987, 58-59.

Raphael (fig.151).⁷⁸ Indeed the figure's pose and the patterns of the draping material are identical, although the heads are different and a background of Classical architecture and a landscape has been added in the engraving.⁷⁹ Raphael's head possesses what Julian Stock calls 'a wholesome matronly beauty' typical of Raphael, and comparable to his full-faced *Galatea* for instance.⁸⁰ No known painting of Lucretia by Raphael survives, but one may have existed which differed slightly from the drawing and included the head and architectural background used by Marcantonio.⁸¹

Wherever the later head originated, the artist appears to have wanted to emphasise Lucretia's nobility and so expunged the matronly aspect of the original drawing. This is further suggested by the fact that the figure turns her head more fully to the side in the engraving to expose her aristocratic profile, which is echoed by the arch behind. The emotive nature of a drawing thus influenced by dramatically charged Hellenic sculpture, where extreme suffering is implied by exaggerated movement, ensures that no further narration is required than the single image. The story is told in the pathos of the forms. Even if an antique statue identified as Lucretia was not the model for the sixteenth century monologic images of Lucretia, other antique sculpture, such as the *Laocoön*, could have provided a model.⁸²

What has been stressed in these works is Lucretia's noble - and manly - courage. Raphael's Lucretia appears to be in an exalted state of mind, triumphant not

⁷⁸Sheard, 1978, 57; Pon, 2004, 95-98.

⁷⁹Sheard, 1978, 57.

⁸⁰Stock, 1984, 423.

⁸¹Rosand, 1994, 34-52.

⁸²Sheard, 1978, 57; Rosand, 1994, 43-44.

despairing.⁸³ The Greek inscription in the Marcantonio engraving 'Better to die than to live in dishonour' identifies the figure as Lucretia and also signifies the Humanistic interest in individual honour.

In his article 'Raphael, Marcantonio and the Icon of Pathos', David Rosand states that prints of engravings, like the one by Marcantonio, would have been acquired by highly educated male connoisseurs and meditated upon in private.⁸⁴ This compares to the small images of devotion which were widely sold in the late mediaeval period, and into the Renaissance, in Italy. These included, for instance, scenes such as the *Ecco Homo* and the *Pietà*, iconography not originating in the Bible but developed by artists to meet the spiritual needs of their patrons. Again, these images portrayed intense suffering and emotion and were designed to inspire similar depths of empathic feeling in the viewer. The monologic images of Lucretia were a natural development of this trend for what Rosand calls 'icons of pathos'.

But in comparison to the rather mystical experiences desired by *Quattrocento* patrons, the *Cinquecento* interest in human emotion was rather more intellectual. A desire to understand how the feelings were caused was prevalent, along with the belief that the use of antique 'figural rhetoric' was the key. Certain forms depicted in certain ways, with balance, harmony and beauty at the heart of the conception, would provoke certain responses in the viewer. Raphael's *Lucretia* can be seen as an experiment in this type of thinking. Lucretia, because of her act of suicide, was viewed as a heroine and from the early sixteenth century, classical sculpture was deemed to be the best language by which to express such an exemplary character,

⁸³Rosand, 1994, 42.

⁸⁴Rosand, 1994, 34-52.

and this involved depicting figures in a state of nudity or partial nudity.⁸⁵ This reiterates the point that the exposure of Lucretia's breasts was not, at this early juncture, intended to have an erotic edge.

Even if a viewer did find such images aesthetically pleasing to look at, Lucretia's breasts continued to link her with other virtuous and heroic women. Into the sixteenth century she appeared in series of illustrious women, as in a sculpted relief attributed to Antonio Lombardo and dated to around 1516 (fig.152).⁸⁶ The original of this sculpture is thought to be in the Walters Gallery, Baltimore, (although the existence of many copies has caused confusion about this) and appears to belong to a series of antique heroes and heroines, now spread widely across the museums of Europe, and probably originally commissioned by a member of the Este court.⁸⁷ The figure has lost an arm which presumably held a dagger and is identified by the inscription: *Castis Exemplar Uxoribus*; chaste exemplar to wives. Antonio has drawn heavily on Raphael's drawing, possibly through a copy of Marcantonio's engraving, as the architectural arch in the background appears to indicate, but in this case it is a broken arch and may signify Lucretia's violation.⁸⁸ Again, Antonio has used antique language in his sculpture to express her nobility and virtuous intent to commit suicide and regain her chastity, and it is because of this that she is completely naked.

⁸⁵Penny, 2004, 84.

⁸⁶Stechow, 1960, 72-85; Sheard, 1978, 57; *Tiziano: Amor Sacro e Amor Profano*, 1995, cat.33, 202, 267-269.

⁸⁷Lewis, 1978, 233-244; Luchs, 2003, 158.

⁸⁸Stechow, 1960, 74.

A lost work by Parmigianino may similarly have tried to replicate the statuesque qualities of Raphael's image (fig.153).⁸⁹ Drawings attributed to this artist, which are housed today in the Budapest Museum, evidently draw heavily on Raphael's model but it is difficult to judge the character of a finished work from such sketchy remnants. An engraving after Parmigianino by Enea Vico shows how Parmigianino brought his mannerist techniques to bear on the subject (fig.154).⁹⁰ However, the seated pose and the knife held away from the body, not pointed at the breast, effects a dilution of intensity and implication. Clearly, the intensity of many images of Lucretia's suicide was effected via the proximity of the dagger and the breast. Lucretia's body in the engraving is meanwhile conveniently exposed for the viewer to appreciate, as was the case with many depictions of Lucretia from later in the sixteenth century, and the knife pointing upwards has distinctly phallic overtones.⁹¹

Sexualised Images of Lucretia.

One of the main modern charges made against High Renaissance painters of Lucretia is that they used her tragic story, which clearly illustrates the miserable condition of women from classical times until very recently, as an excuse for an erotically pleasing painting designed for male viewers and with no sympathy for the real woman or the many other women who have suffered similar fates. This applies to both scenes of Lucretia's death and the depictions of the rape, which became

⁸⁹Freedberg, 1950, 238-239.

⁹⁰Freedberg, 1950, 221-222.

⁹¹The phallic nature of the knife was pointed out to me by Dr. Louise Bourdua.

popular in the middle of the *Cinquecento*.⁹² Many of the renaissance artists who chose to paint these episodes have come under attack in recent years.⁹³

The artist known as Il Sodoma, who was closely associated with the papal court of Leo X, produced at least three or four versions of the *Death of Lucretia*, one of which was acquired by the pope and according to Vasari earned him the title of *cavaliere*.⁹⁴ His first known attempt, now in the Kestner Museum, Hannover, was produced in the very earliest years of the *Cinquecento* and it is still *Quattrocentesque* in style (fig.155).⁹⁵ Although this Lucretia fits into the category of monologic, in that she is alone in a landscape, she does not appear unduly wracked with emotion and has none of the monumental grandeur of Raphael's drawing. This painting is thought to be part of a series of illustrious women, however, and has formal ties with similar paintings by Sodoma of Charity and Judith.⁹⁶

Although Lucretia's breasts are exposed at the moment of suicide in this painting, the moralistic nature of the depiction and the association with figures such as Charity, precludes a sexualised interpretation of the exposure of the breasts. This image may well be one of the earliest to include the exposure of Lucretia's breasts at the moment of suicide and indeed probably precedes Raphael's drawing and the discovery of an antique statue at Trastevere, but in the context of other illustrious

⁹²See Higgonet, 19, 68-83 for a discussion of the strange attraction scenes of female suicide have apparently held for males historically.

⁹³See particularly Garrard, 1989, 210-239; Emison, 1991, 272; Hulst, 1991, 205-207.

⁹⁴Vasari, *Le Vite*, 1966 ed., 5, 384-385.

⁹⁵Stechow, 1951, 115.

⁹⁶Hayum, 1976, 124-127; 269; Haraszti-Takacs, 1978, 83-84. See Chapter Two, notes 148-150.



fig.155 Il Sodoma, *The Death of Lucretia*, early 16th century, Hannover, Kestner Museum.



fig.156 Il Sodoma, *The Death of Lucretia*, 1520s, Budapest, Private Collection.



fig.157 Il Sodoma, *The Death of Lucretia*, c1516, Turin, Galleria Sabauda.



fig.158 Titian, *The Death of Lucretia*, 1517, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie.

women the exposure of the breasts represents Lucretia's determination to regain her chastity, so that she virtually becomes a personification of the virtue Chastity.

Sodoma's subsequent versions of the image of Lucretia are very different in comparison. One, now in Budapest, is thought possibly to be a copy of the version given to Pope Leo X, its 1520s dating being rather late, but its composition, with two male attendants, conforms to Vasari's description (fig.156).⁹⁷ The posture of the twisting female, with her upraised arm, bears some resemblance to Raphael's drawing, but the inclusion of the two males, presumably Lucretia's father and husband, has less to do with narrative and more to do with heightening the erotic appeal of the painting. Lucretia's body is completely naked and exposed apart from a thin transparent drape across her lower half. The knife wound has already been made and she collapses so that the men surround her and support her. As a result her father appears to embrace her closely and a male viewer might very well enjoy imagining himself in the place of this man. The juxtaposition of the clothed males with the undressed female, leaning back as if passively offering her body to the viewer, ensures that, despite the undoubted melancholy tone of the painting, erotic enjoyment is definitely a strong part of the experience of the viewer.

A third painting by Sodoma, now in Turin, dating to the second decade of the *Cinquecento*, similarly encourages voyeuristic appreciation (fig.157).⁹⁸ The sexual attractiveness of this Lucretia is emphasised by jewelled decoration and sensuously depicted tumbling blond hair. Her drapes fall titillatingly open, exposing her breasts in a manner which appears to simulate the disorderly dress of a raped woman and

⁹⁷Stechow, 1951, 121.

⁹⁸Garrard, 1989, 223.

might even suggest torn-open genitals. She looks upward rather pathetically and with none of the vigour of Raphael's drawing. In death, as in life, this fragile woman must be supported by men. Her suicide is not an autonomous courageous action but the act of a woman who is almost unaware of the implications of what she does.⁹⁹ In such a highly eroticised image, the exposure of the breasts takes on very different connotations, but the ambiguity of breast symbolism, verging between chaste and sexualised, continues to convey complex messages.

In the second decade of the *Cinquecento* the cult of Lucretia evidently spread out from Rome. An image of a woman which held such potential could not but be attractive to artists in and around Venice, where the trend for half-length sensuous paintings of women, often anonymous courtesans, designed with the main intention of giving erotic pleasure to a male viewer and often given a cloak of respectability with the adoption of an identity from Classical antiquity, had developed.¹⁰⁰

Into this category must go a painting now in Vienna attributed to Titian and dating to around 1517 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie fig.158).¹⁰¹ This depiction of Lucretia, with its broad proportions, undone chemise falling over one shoulder of the pretty and patently undistressed woman, recalls many others of this type, most famously, perhaps, Palma Vecchio's *Flora*. A male figure accompanies

⁹⁹Compare this painting to Sebastiano del Piombo's panel of St. Agatha 1517, now in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence (fig.134). These paintings are contemporary and, despite the fact that in one case the woman is attacking herself and in the other is being attacked by men, the voyeurism of the viewer is, in both cases, encouraged by the fact that a naked woman is surrounded by clothed males. The two women gaze upwards, evoking other Christian imagery, but this does not obscure the fact that both images contain distinctly erotic overtones.

¹⁰⁰Junkerman, 1988, *passim*.

¹⁰¹Joannides, 2001, 254-258.

Lucretia in this painting but looks so threatening that it may possibly represent Tarquin and not her father or husband, so that the two images of the rape and the suicide are conflated. The plainly sexual motivation behind such images has the effect of calling into question the moral nature of Lucretia herself as conceived in this way. Instead of appearing heroic and courageous she appears debased, possibly even adulterous.¹⁰²

Several versions of half length Lucretias were produced in the first half of the *Cinquecento* with similarly shallow aims.¹⁰³ But the subject was not always treated so one-sidedly in sixteenth-century Venice. A full-length painting by Titian or his brother, Francesco Vecellio, dating to around 1526, now in the Royal collection at Hampton Court, demonstrates how an image which is evidently sexualised could also attempt to convey Lucretia's noble courage (fig.159).¹⁰⁴ This painting does not try to avoid the issue of sexuality, but uses it to create a complex and paradoxical statement about the nature of female beauty and virtue.

In this painting Lucretia is completely nude, which has the effect of making her emblematic and metonymically suggests her involuntary nakedness during Tarquin's violation. Her exposed breasts, where the death blow is to fall, are emphasised by the movement which pulls one into profile while the other remains frontal. The overall effect of the picture is one of grandeur created by the dynamic body so close to the front plain of the painting and the agitated billowing drapery, the beautiful landscape background on one side contrasted to the monumental

¹⁰²Junkerman, 1988, 405-406.

¹⁰³Junkerman, 1988, 402-425.

¹⁰⁴Rhona Goffen was convinced this painting was by Titian but others do not agree, see Shearman, 1983, 280-282; Goffen, 1997, 198-204; Penny, 2004, 84.



fig.159 Titian? *The Death of Lucretia*, c1525, Hampton Court, Royal Collection.

classical architecture on the left, which focuses attention on the hand with the dagger. Lucretia's stepping-forward motion gives the viewer the impression that she is moving forward towards the knife and her death.¹⁰⁵ Like Raphael's figure she turns her head away from the instrument of death, but whereas Raphael's figure simply turns her head and Marcantonio's closes her eyes, the figure in this painting completely hides her face, as if overcome with excesses of emotion.

However, the hidden face and blatantly exposed body, so sensuously depicted, cannot but open up the possibility of voyeurism on the viewer's part, to a degree that is simply not possible with the Raphael/Marcantonio images. After all, if there is no face, one need not think too hard about the real woman and her sufferings, one can just appreciate the beautiful female form. But instead of simply exploiting Lucretia perhaps the artist was trying to express the inherent ambivalence of her story. He cannot have been blind to the double-edged effect of presenting a beautiful nude woman whose very desirability reminds the viewer that she had been raped, and whose desperate action clearly shows the disastrous effect of her fate to be both attractive and in great danger of losing her honour as a result.

In a letter to Titian of 1550, Girolamo Parabosco sums up the difficulties of a man looking at this image. He wrote that the painting of Lucretia was so beautiful,

‘and made with such beautiful art and high judgement that at one and the same time she excuses proud Tarquin his sin and makes whoever admires her worthy of a more grievous harm than he suffered, because there is no

¹⁰⁵Goffen, 1997, 199.

man with enough spirit to confess himself continent before such a beautiful figure, nor no one so cruel whom her death does not curdle'.¹⁰⁶

This warmly-coloured painting successfully communicates the complexities of the story and the situation Lucretia found herself in. The breast, threatened by the dagger, aids the communication of such complicated concepts. Both erotic and maternal, like Lucretia herself, symbol of virtue and sexuality, it is the means by which Lucretia regains her chastity. As a pagan, not a Christian figure, and one whose reputation was not entirely positive, Lucretia was suitable subject matter for a broad spectrum of artistic images which ranged from the moral exemplar to the sexually exploitative and because of its broad range of meaning, the uncovered breast helped to express Lucretia's ambivalent status.¹⁰⁷

In a chapter devoted to Lucretia and Cleopatra, in her study of Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Garrard has argued, however, that sadopornographic motivations lie behind the popularity of images of Lucretia's rape and suicide.¹⁰⁸ Certainly, we must treat with caution representations of women produced in a period when they were in a position of subjugation, when lack of education and property rights resulted in most women having no power of autonomy. The traditional image of

¹⁰⁶Cited in Goffen, 1997, 204.

¹⁰⁷This phenomenon can also be found, however, with an altogether Christian figure, Mary Magdalene, in the sixteenth century. The Magdalene, although a penitent, had led a highly sexual life up until her encounter with Christ and this legitimised the production of images of her as a weeping penitent yet also as a highly attractive and eroticised figure which contrasted sharply with images of her produced in the *Quattrocento*. Her breasts are often lusciously prominent in these images, once more signifying her sexual nature as well as her connections with the Virgin Mary and figures such as Lucretia. See Goffen, 1997, 171-192 for discussion of Titian's half-length Magdalenes.

¹⁰⁸Garrard, 1989, 210.

Lucretia, as she was portrayed in both literature and art in the early Renaissance, was an ideal of the female sex, and such idealisations were constructed by men to bolster their own position of power.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, images of beautiful nude women served to re-affirm women as objects, pleasing to look at and available for men's sexual satisfaction, while images of violence against women served to inspire fear of transgressing the accepted hierarchical codes and tend to indicate the male belief that women were inimically alien and dangerous to men.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, because many artists of the *Cinquecento* created images of Lucretia which were idealisations of female beauty, although this complies with the story - for Tarquin would not have behaved with such madness if Lucretia had not been exquisitely beautiful - it also brings up the issue of whether or not Lucretia was responsible for the rape because she was so beautiful. Such transference of the blame for sexual crime is indicative of contemporary attitudes to women. As Boccaccio stated 'Hers was an unfortunate beauty ...', in other words, her beauty was to blame.¹¹¹

However, although it is true that some artists exploited the opportunity to depict a scene with so much potential for prurience, there are arguments which suggest that not all artists had such shallow motives. Many sixteenth-century images of Lucretia can be found to have made a valid attempt to depict the subject in a thought-provoking and sympathetic way, even while pandering to the contemporary

¹⁰⁹See Weidmann, 1994, 1-21, for an extensive discussion of these issues.

¹¹⁰M. Bal, however, has shown in her essay 'Visual Rhetoric: The Semiotics of Rape', 1991, 60-93, how images of rape and suicide can be useful today, when dealing with the issues as they exist in our own society.

¹¹¹Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 1963 ed., 46, 103.

taste for the depiction of female beauty and even sexuality in art. The development of interest in the rape and the suicide scene indicates the development of Humanism. Individual psychological emotions and reactions, particularly when induced by circumstances of great stress, were matters which occupied the minds of scholars of the sixteenth century a great deal.¹¹² The two moments of Lucretia's rape and her suicide are the turning points in the story and the points which are most charged with emotion; it is not surprising that they were the episodes singled out for particular attention in the *Cinquecento*.

It was also in line with general artistic trends that images of Lucretia in various stages of undress began to proliferate from the second decade of the *Cinquecento*: increased knowledge of classical sculpture and the Humanist atmosphere ensured that nudity was a frequent element in art and resulted in increased levels of sexual content. However, for Lucretia this meant that her status became distinctly ambivalent, partly because of the explicitly sexual nature of her story and also because of the slight suspicion, dating back to St. Augustine, that she may have been an adulteress.

Ovid has been accused of originally eroticising Lucretia and thus providing the basis for the many paintings of her produced in the *Cinquecento* with a primarily sexual purport.¹¹³ His unfinished *Fasti* was an elegiac poem tracing all the festivals of the Roman calendar, and the story of Lucretia, which appears as the climax of the second book, February, is a personal tale of tragedy not a political narrative, and Ovid devotes only a very short passage to the political consequences of the story.¹¹⁴

¹¹²Rosand, 1994, 34-39.

¹¹³Hults, 1991, 207.

¹¹⁴Newlands, 1995, 155.

Instead he focuses on details, describing Lucretia's beauty in far greater detail than Livy and clearly with the intention of stirring the emotions of the reader. Lucretia was beautiful; if she had not been Tarquin would not have become mad with lust for her, although Ovid makes it clear that Tarquin was equally attracted by her wifely chasteness:

‘Her beauty is attractive, her snowy complexion and golden hair, ...
The smaller his chances, the greater his desire.’¹¹⁵

But Ovid does not give any grounds for depicting Lucretia naked at the moment of suicide. The sixteenth-century choice to show her in this way did not originate in Ovid's *Fasti*, which states that ‘... on the point of death, she made sure her collapse was not unseemly ...’.¹¹⁶

From the late Middle Ages, however, reconsideration of her story by contemporary writers did, perhaps, give license to the more sexualised images which began to appear in the sixteenth century. Coluccio Salutati's late *Trecento* work, the *Declamatio Lucretiae*, was one of the first texts to come back to the issues which had been raised by St. Augustine. Salutati set out the arguments for and against Lucretia's suicide and although in the end he comes down in defence of her action, viewing it as in accordance with what was required in the society in which she lived, he does point out that ‘A woman will not be thought innocent who afflicts herself with the punishment of a criminal.’¹¹⁷ Salutati follows Augustine's arguments that Lucretia's ‘body has been violated, but [her] soul is untouched’ and that her desire

¹¹⁵Ovid, *Fasti*, 1995 ed., lines 763-765.

¹¹⁶Ovid, *Fasti*, 1995 ed., line 834.

¹¹⁷Coluccio Salutati, *Declamatio Lucretiae*, translation from Jed, 1989, 150.

for suicide indicated a desire for glory.¹¹⁸ Although Lucretia appeared in art as a moral exemplar throughout the *Quattrocento*, suspicions about her true character gradually surfaced towards the end of the century.¹¹⁹

At the end of the *Quattrocento* Niccoló Machiavelli's play, *La Mandragola*, used Lucretia's story in a typically cynical manner to tell the story of an innocent wife, named Lucretia, who is tricked by her impotent husband into sleeping with another man so that she might become pregnant, and ends up enjoying the experience.¹²⁰ Machiavelli's play thus questions the virtuous nature of Lucretia and throws suspicion on her chastity. This type of manipulation of the original story is indicative of many examples of literature which pertain to the Lucretia story written from that date and into the Baroque. Although writers such as Shakespeare continued to treat the story in a traditional way, the question of whether or not she was actually adulterous inevitably became current in the *Cinquecento*, so much so that it was possible for Pietro Aretino to write in a letter to a friend in 1537: 'What did you make of Lucretia? Was she not mad to follow the promptings of honour? It would have been a clever thing to have had her fun with master Tarquin, and have lived.'¹²¹ This type of jocular view which threw doubt on Lucretia's virtue, proliferated from that time.¹²² In addition, the Christian reforms of the sixteenth

¹¹⁸Coluccio Salutati, *Declamatio Lucretiae*, translation from Jed, 1989, 150. The suspicion that Lucretia was seeking glory via her suicide, first raised by Augustine, did not entirely disappear during the Middle Ages as she was occasionally personified as the vice *Vanitas*, see Weidmann, 1994, 12.

¹¹⁹Donaldson, 1982, 38.

¹²⁰Machiavelli, 'La Mandragola', 1520, in *Five Italian Renaissance Comedies*, 1978. See Behuniak-Long, 1989, 264-80.

¹²¹Shakespeare, 'The Rape of Lucrece', 1280-1297; Pietro Aretino cited in Donaldson, 1982, 38.

¹²²Donaldson, 1982, 83-100.

century resulted in a tendency once more to condemn her suicide and see it in the light of a desire for glory.¹²³

Rape Scenes.

It is impossible to discuss the sexualisation of many images of the suicide of Lucretia in the *Cinquecento* without pointing out that depictions of her rape, inevitably highly eroticised, also became popular from the middle of the century. But once again, these images are not straightforward titillation for men, despite their highly dubious subject matter, and must be considered in a non-biased light. Although artists of the north showed an early interest in depictions of the rape scene, and there exist many examples of northern engravings which date to the 1530s and 40s and which tend, to a greater or lesser extent, towards vulgarity, it would appear that the initial impetus for these scenes came again from Italy, from original designs by either Giulio Romano or Raphael.¹²⁴ In the 1530s Giulio Romano designed a scene for the ceiling of the *Camerino dei Falconi*, in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua,

¹²³Donaldson, 1982, 145-168.

¹²⁴See Goffen, 1997, 204-207 and Fehl, 1992, 201-206. In the north of Europe the fashion for depicting Lucretia at the moment of death also took hold early in the *Cinquecento*, Muller and Noël, 1987, 129-159. Lucretia had enjoyed there a similar reputation as an exemplar of virtue, appearing most often, in the *Quattrocento*, in series of good women. From the early *Cinquecento*, presumably due in great part to the influence of Dürer who, as already mentioned, made an 1508 drawing of Lucretia, and despite strong condemnation from reforming writers such as Erasmus, northern artists tended to mirror the Italian trend of depicting Lucretia in various states of undress, with the knife embedded in her body, often with blood running down her torso. As in Italy, there was a good deal of exploitation of the image, but Lucretia remained a moral exemplar for wives into the sixteenth century, as demonstrated in depictions of her by Jan Gossaert and Jan van Scorel. These depictions appear on the back of panels on the front of which are portraits of bridegrooms, see Hults, 1991, 126 and Gluck, 1945, 136-137.

which shows a man running into a room, violently pushing a naked woman backwards onto a bed and pointing with his sword at a servant who is entering the room (fig.160).¹²⁵ This painting was not identified as Tarquin and Lucretia by Frederick Hartt in his 1958 monograph on Giulio, but the narrative content of the story appears to fit the imagery, and is suitable for situation in a room dedicated to birds of prey.¹²⁶ Whether or not it was intended originally as a depiction of the rape of Lucretia, it was certainly used by later artists as a model for their own depictions of that particular scene. In particular, Giorgio Ghisi, Giulio Romano's preferred engraver, did a copy of the ceiling painting, a print now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, dating to around 1540 (fig.161).¹²⁷

An inscription in an engraving by Agostino Veneziano, now housed in the Albertina, Vienna, of a similar scene but with a differing composition, credits Raphael with the *invenzione* (fig.162).¹²⁸ This engraving appears to depict a slightly earlier moment in the narrative, when Tarquin has just entered the room and is gently trying to persuade Lucretia. She lies rigid on the bed and tries to cover herself, but is not as yet too frightened. Giulio Romano's scene comes a few moments later when Lucretia has leapt from her bed trying to escape, Tarquin has lost his temper, yielded to violence and is pointing at the servant, making his threat to dishonour Lucretia with death and adultery. As Agostino Veneziano's engraving is rather coarse in some of its details, the two dogs copulating prominently in the foreground for example, doubt is cast on whether Raphael really was the author of the design. Yet another engraving, however, by Giovanni Francesco Penni, in the Windsor

¹²⁵Hartt, 1981, 170.

¹²⁶Boorsch, 1985, 37-38.

¹²⁷Boorsch, 1985, 37-38.

¹²⁸Fehl, 1992, 201-206.

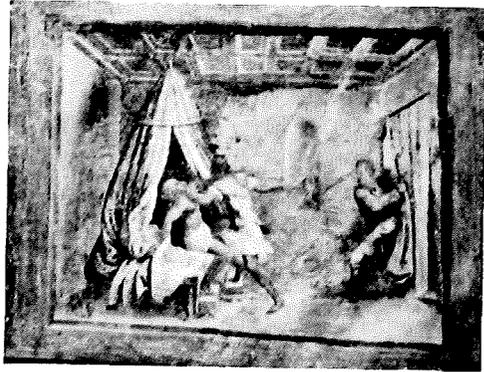


fig.160 Giulio Romano (designer), ceiling of the Camerino dei Falconi, including a scene of the rape of a woman, Mantua, Palazzo Ducale.

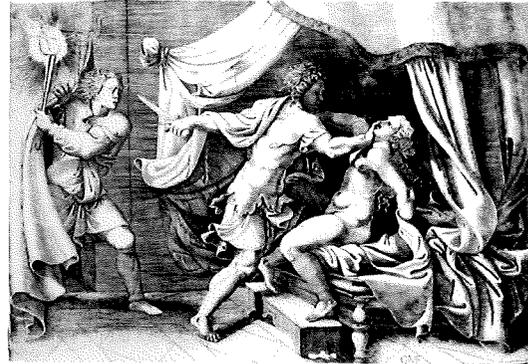


fig.161 Giorgio Ghisi after Giulio Romano, *The Rape of Lucretia*, c1540, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Elisha Whittelsey Collection.

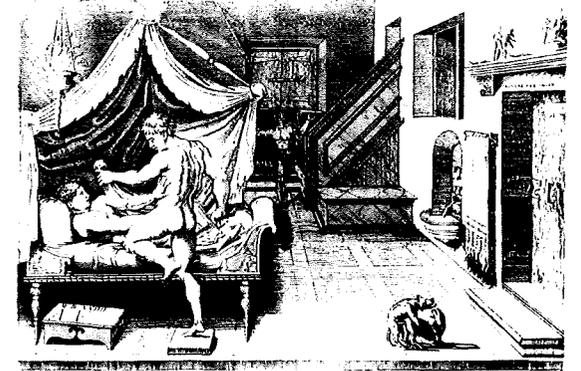


fig.162 Agostino Veneziano, *The Rape of Lucretia*, Vienna, Albertina.



fig.163 Giovanni Francesco Penni, *The Rape of Lucretia*, Windsor Collection.

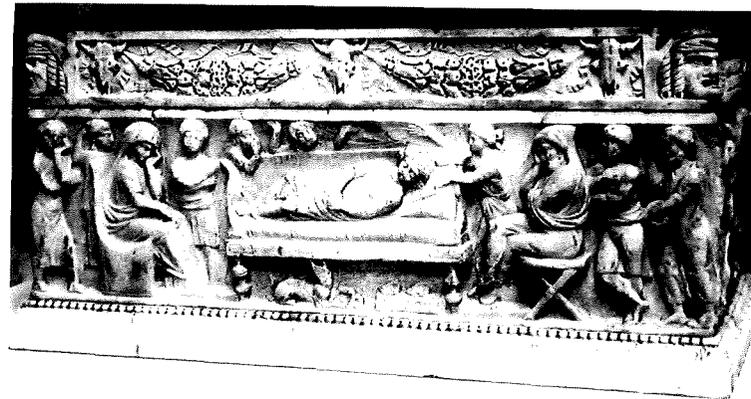


fig.164 Roman sarcophagus, London, British Museum, Townley Collection.



fig.165 Translation of Valerius Maximus by Simon Hesdin and Nicolle de Gonesse, *The Story of Lucretia*, 1469, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr.284, folio 176.

Collection, closely resembles the Agostino Veneziano but does not include any of the coarser details (fig.163).¹²⁹ Penni was an associate of Raphael and so perhaps his engraving was a more faithful copy of a now lost Raphael which also influenced Giulio Romano in his painting.

It tends to be assumed that it was the lascivious patrons and artists of the *Cinquecento* who decided to depict Lucretia naked in bed and a fully-clothed Tarquin attacking her, and Philip Fehl has even identified a Classical sarcophagus available in Rome during the *Cinquecento* as the ultimate source of the composition used by Giulio Romano in his ceiling painting (fig.164).¹³⁰ But in fact, the origins of the *Cinquecento* rape scenes lie predominantly in *Quattrocento* manuscript illustrations of the literary sources of the story, and *cassone* panels. A manuscript translation of Valerius Maximus, printed in 1469 by Simon de Hesdin and Nicolle de Gonesse, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (fr.284, folio 176), although not so dramatic as sixteenth century versions, depicts the episode in a very similar manner to that of Giulio Romano, juxtaposing a naked Lucretia with a fully dressed Tarquin (fig.165). And although this manuscript originated in the north, evidence that the tradition was the same in Italy during the *Quattrocento* can be found on *cassone* panels, where occasionally Lucretia is depicted naked in bed, her exposed breasts aiding the communication of the narrative (figs144-145). As with the images of Lucretia's suicide, the exposure of her breasts does not necessarily indicate an erotic intention in the earlier scenes of rape, although it may indicate the sexual nature of her story.

¹²⁹Fehl, 1992, 205-206.

¹³⁰Fehl, 1992, 206.

Wherever the idea originated, the rape as a single scene was new. The depiction of an actual rape is very different from that of a suicide and is difficult for twenty-first century viewers to look on with equanimity, the moral implications being even more involved. Giulio Romano's *Lucretia* is genuinely frightened and is being very roughly handled by Tarquin, and so the viewer's sympathy is induced. But the very nature of the scene, with a naked woman in bed, could easily also cause sexual arousal in the male viewer and the fact that she is about to be violently sexually assaulted makes images of the rape particularly unacceptable to many today.

Titian painted at least two versions of the *Rape of Lucretia* and his workshop produced many copies and variations.¹³¹ His most famous and earliest version was painted in the 1560s and is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (fig.166).¹³² Although this painting is far less brutal than many examples, and decorously covers Lucretia's body with her left arm, it has attracted modern criticism.¹³³ Indeed, the very fact that the violence in this scene is not explicit has led some art historians to misinterpret it.

Norman Bryson suggests in one essay that Titian merged two iconographic motifs in this painting; seductress and rapist, and that the moment portrayed is the moment when Lucretia gives her consent.¹³⁴ Bryson believes that Titian is addressing the question of whether a woman who gives her consent is a rape victim

¹³¹Bryson, 1986, 152-173; Fehl, 1992, 198-216; Goffen, 1997, 204-213.

¹³²Jaffé and Groen, 1987, 162-172.

¹³³See particularly Bryson, 1986. Fehl, 1992, 198, discusses modern reactions to the painting.

¹³⁴Bryson, 1986.



fig.166 Titian, *The Rape of Lucretia*, 1560s, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum.

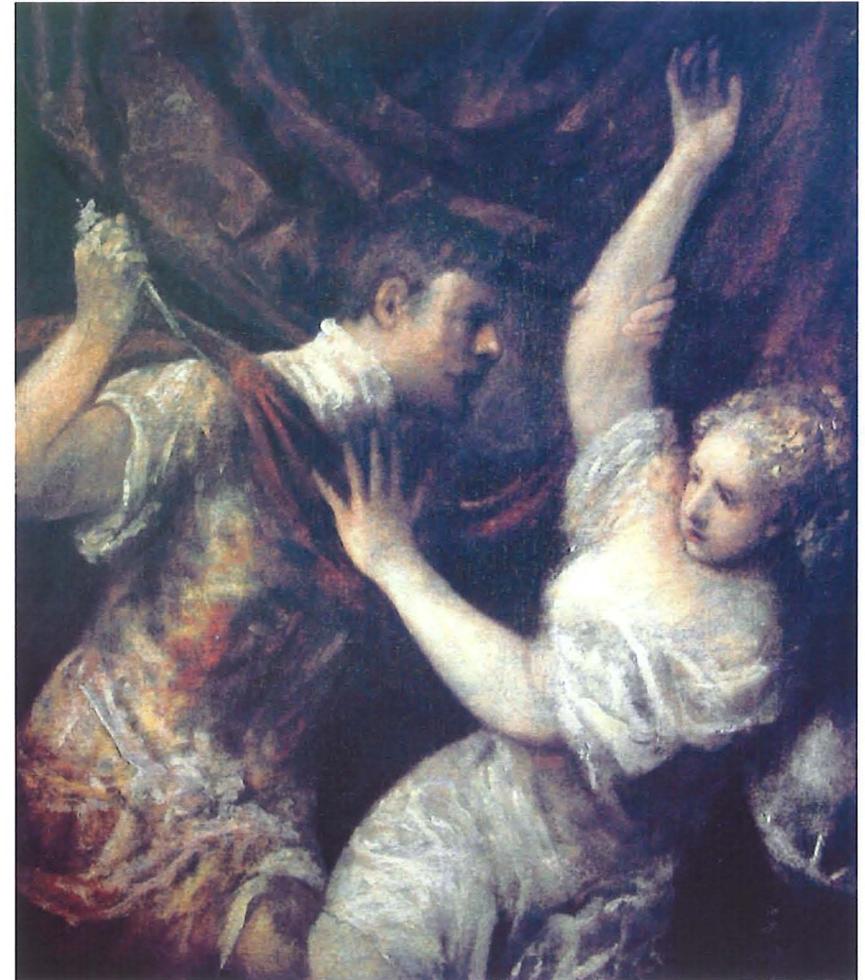


fig.167 Titian, *The Rape of Lucretia*, 1570s, Vienna, Akademie der Bildenden Künste.

or an adulteress. He argues that, because in Venice rape against a noblewoman was the worst offence a nobleman could commit, and that because the woman was always suspected of being to some degree culpable in cases of rape, Titian depicts a crime of rank, sexual excess and debauchery. Bryson even argues that this image would be comforting to men because it affirms that just like men, women could be overcome by lust. The concerns of the painting are thus to do with issues affecting society and reflect the fear of havoc that could be caused by such licentious behaviour among the nobles, and in particular by illegitimate pregnancy.

But Bryson ignores Lucretia's obvious distress in this painting; in no way is she coyly playing with Tarquin. Her jewels and elegantly arranged hair certainly mark her out as a noblewoman, but they also increase the effect of her beauty, the beauty which drove Tarquin mad with lust. Instead of suggesting a plan to seduce Tarquin her nakedness stresses her vulnerability, innocence and truth, as with several *Quattrocento* depictions of the rape.¹³⁵ Lucretia raises her right arm to fight him off but at the same moment pleads for mercy with the other, which she rests on his chest in a gesture that can only be read as warding him off gently and simultaneously trying to appeal to his reason and sympathy. The acute distress in her face is plain, 'her wifely cheeks turn scarlet' at her exposed nudity and tears fall from her eyes.¹³⁶ She may be giving in to Tarquin physically, but it is clear that consent gained under such conditions is no consent at all. Meanwhile Tarquin appears transfigured by his lust, he too is dressed as a noble, but his wildly staring eyes betray him as a deranged criminal. Again, this is an examination of individual psychological reactions to extreme circumstances.

¹³⁵Goffen, 1997, 208.

¹³⁶Ovid, *Fasti*, 1995 ed., line 828.

Titian's later version of the *Rape of Lucretia*, painted in the 1570s and now in Vienna (Akademie der Bildenden Künste), demonstrates how he used his technique of agitated brushstroke, or *non-finito*, to express further the excessive mental stress Lucretia and Tarquin are under (fig.167).¹³⁷ This narrative moment comes slightly before the one depicted in Titian's earlier painting; Lucretia still fights with vehemence, her dress, although for the most part covering her, is torn and exposes one breast, referring forward to the suicide, and she appears to be about to collapse backwards, signalling her imminent capitulation. Philip Fehl believes that Titian's advanced old age led to an expression of helplessness in the face of history in these works: an artist could not change Lucretia's fate, he could only record it.¹³⁸

Undoubtedly Titian meant to shock his audience with these paintings. The earlier was executed for Philip II and the subject matter fits in generally with the type Titian usually employed in paintings for Philip, which included his *Rape of Europa*, for instance. Rape was a very frequent element of the Classical tales which were so popular in the sixteenth century. Even so, the rape of a mortal and supposedly non-fictional woman by an equally mortal man results in a rather more disturbing image. There is something so bizarre in the idea of a woman being raped by a bull that it must be fantasy. But the story of Lucretia and Tarquin is different. Titian presents the viewer with a challenge; he must at once acknowledge Lucretia's beauty and the sexually exciting nature of this scene, and simultaneously abhor Tarquin's actions.

¹³⁷Goffen, 1997, 210-212.

¹³⁸Fehl, 1992, 199-200.

Virtue in Tact.

Despite all the sexually charged images of Lucretia which began to appear in the *Cinquecento*, and despite the literature which took a disparaging view of her, she did not entirely lose her value as a Christian emblem of chastity. Indeed, some paintings, such as one by Francesco Francia, now in New York, continue to show a strong tendency to parallel Lucretia with Christian figures (fig.168).¹³⁹ Francia's woman could easily be a Madonna or a martyr as she raises her eyes to heaven as if waiting for an angel sent from God. The climactic moment of decision is past and the dagger has already been inserted. Set in a beautiful landscape the mood is quiet, not tense or dramatic, recalling the mood of many sacred scenes produced in the early *Cinquecento*.

Evidence that Lucretia's status remained high is also given in the fact that the name Lucretia, although pagan, was commonly given to baby girls during this period. Indeed there is one example of a painting, by Dosso Dossi, now in the S. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, which shows a Saint Lucretia, possibly an obscure Spanish saint, the namesake of Lucrezia Borgia. In this work a shadowy sculpture in a niche in the background may represent the classical Lucretia (fig.169).¹⁴⁰

Furthermore, Lorenzo Lotto chose to depict Lucretia in a small fictive drawing in his *Portrait of a Lady* (London, National Gallery), dating to c1533, possibly to identify his sitter and to imply that she is a lady of great virtue

¹³⁹Stagni, 1986, 1-28.

¹⁴⁰Suida, 1949, 275-84; Waterhouse, 1952, 358-59; Gibbons, 1968, cat.117, Humfrey and Lucco, 1998, 181-183.



fig.168 Francesco Francia, *The Death of Lucretia*, c1508, New York, City Art Gallery.



fig.169 Dosso Dossi, *Saint Lucretia*, c1514, Washington, National Gallery of Art, Kress Collection.



fig.171 Tintoretto, *The Rape of Lucretia*, c1585-90, Chicago, The Art Institute.



fig.172 Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Lady*, detail of *The Death of Lucretia*, c1533, London, National Gallery.



134 Lotto, *Lucretia Valier as Lucretia* (c.1533). Canvas, 95 x 110 cm. London, National Gallery.

fig.170 Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Lady*, c1533, London, National Gallery.

(fig.170).¹⁴¹ It was common to show in portraits some symbolic reference to the name of the sitter, a flower, a patron saint or a character from history. Lotto, in attempting to indicate the name of his subject in this case perhaps wanted to affirm that she was in possession of all Lucretia's virtues but also that she had not suffered the same stain to her honour, and this explains his use of the device of the fictive drawing.¹⁴² The drawing of Lucretia, held by the sitter, is identified by a cartellino on the table with the inscription 'Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve', a reference to Livy's story of Lucretia.¹⁴³

This portrait has caused some debate among modern art historians. Its subject appears to be very aggressive in her assertion that she is as virtuous as the exemplary heroine. This has led one twentieth century writer to claim that the lady 'protests too much' and thus must have something to hide.¹⁴⁴ Indeed this confusion appears to date back a long way, as it was entitled *La Cortigiana* for many years; but the assertion, made by Jaffé in 1971, that it is in fact a portrait of Lucretia Valier, made the possibility that she is defending her honour against some scandal of her own making unlikely.¹⁴⁵ Although it is by no means certain this is a portrait of Lucretia Valier and the portrait is very unusual in depicting such an assertive woman, it has subsequently been generally accepted that her dress and setting indicate that she is a respectable married lady.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹See Jaffé, 1971, 696-702; Dunkerton, Penny and Roy, 1998, 52-63; Goffen, 2000, 95-135; Brown, Humfrey and Lucco, 1997, 185-187 and Penny, 2004, 74-91.

¹⁴²Penny, 2004, 78-79.

¹⁴³See note 4 and Penny, 2004, 77, 81.

¹⁴⁴Gould, 1959, 54.

¹⁴⁵Jaffé, 1971, 696-702.

¹⁴⁶Penny, 2004, 79-80.

Several curious details have added to the misinterpretation of this painting over the years, because they fit ill with modern perception of how *Cinquecento* women were generally represented in painting. This woman roughly grasps the drawing, actually crumpling it, and appears overly rigid in her pose. She catches the viewer's eye with a stern glance and while she is dressed with much finery and jewels, she appears rather dishevelled; her veil is loose and her necklaces are tucked into her bodice, not properly hung around her neck.

These things can, in fact, all be interpreted positively. Lucretia was described by Ovid as being 'The wife with the courage of a man...'.¹⁴⁷ Lorenzo Lotto's upright renaissance wife firmly states her claim to have the same type of energy and determination in the protection of her marital chastity in her masculine gestures and strong glance, which would intimidate any man who might dare to look at her with lecherous intent. Her disarray may refer to Lucretia's disarray after the rape and indicate that this woman is willing to fight to save her own honour.

The oddly positioned jewels lying across the woman's breast are particularly interesting in the present context. Presumably these jewels are a family heirloom, very likely belonging to her husband's family and have been identified as a bridal pendant, again confirming that this is a married woman.¹⁴⁸ She wears them across her breast to vigorously proclaim that she would prefer death to bringing dishonour to her husband. They form a kind of shield or protective armour across a vulnerable area of her body: the very area where Tarquin first laid claim to the original Lucretia and where she dealt her death wound. Both sexually significant and representative of

¹⁴⁷Ovid, *Fasti*, 1995 ed., line 847.

¹⁴⁸Penny, 2004, 75.

chastity, as well as referring to her possible future motherhood, perhaps her breasts are shielded by the jewels in this way to affirm that only her husband and children have a right to lie there.¹⁴⁹

It is instructive to compare Lorenzo Lotto's portrait painting with a depiction of the rape of Lucretia by Tintoretto (Chicago, The Art Institute, fig.171).

Tintoretto's painting is typically startling in its *invenzione*: dating to around 1585-90, this work awkwardly combines a realistic domestic setting turned chaotic by the struggle between the man and the woman, with manneristically elongated and foreshortened bodies.¹⁵⁰ Tintoretto can fairly be accused of deliberately presenting a sexually exciting image, the virtually naked female body is stretched out as if to invite the viewer to appreciate the beautiful form. But Tintoretto also depicts Lucretia in a positive light. A terrible fight has evidently taken place, and the appalling upheaval of the room, the destruction of the baldacchin over the bed, the broken jewellery, torn drapery and her desperately awkward pose, all indicate just how determinedly Lucretia has struggled to retain her honour. Meanwhile the dagger, dropped in the tussle, has fallen to the floor and lies pointing upward, straight at Lucretia's exposed and vulnerable body.

¹⁴⁹A *Madonna and Child with Saints Catherine and Thomas* by Lotto in Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie) also depicts the figure of Catherine wearing jewels in a similar manner. Goffen has suggested that as Catherine experienced a mystic vision of marriage to Christ, the motif refers in some way to marriage, Goffen, 2000, 106-109; Penny, 2004, 78.

¹⁵⁰Pallucchini and Rossi, 1982, 1, 229. There are several copies of this work, one by Tintoretto (Colonia, Kunsthau Lempertz) and one possibly by his son Domenico (Madrid, Prado), see Pallucchini and Rossi, 1982, 1, 105-108, 247. See also Halden, 1922, 208-210. Neither of these include the pearl necklace detail, however.

Tintoretto's painting captures a single moment and it appears to be the instant when Lucretia finally gives in to Tarquin. This is indicated by the fact that she raises her hands in a placating gesture, his strength has overpowered her. It is also conveyed by Lucretia's necklace which has burst asunder, spreading the precious pearls across the floor. This broken necklace motif appears, therefore, to symbolise the loss of Lucretia's chastity and the violent breaking of her will. Lorenzo Lotto's woman on the other hand retains her virtue and her jewellery remains intact, positioned across her breast very prominently.

Considering the rarity of rape scenes, Tintoretto's creation must have been extremely shocking to contemporary audiences. However, as always with Tintoretto, one suspects that his real interest in the subject lay with its potential for causing a sensation.¹⁵¹ And it seems a strong possibility that some sixteenth century male viewers could have derived great satisfaction from the attractively displayed body of the woman and the sexually demeaning position she is in.

Lorenzo Lotto's small drawing of Lucretia, on the other hand, shows Lucretia firm in her intent to expiate her shame as she looks towards the knife unflinchingly and draws her right hand high to deliver the blow, but she remains very alert and modestly covers the site of her shame with her drapery (fig.172). The lack of colour and plasticity created by such a drawing tends to draw all the sexuality out of the image. No seductive quality is allowed to exist in this painting because Lotto was dealing with a real person with a reputation to protect and he could not allow any of the ambiguity, which other artists played on, to enter his work. Unfortunately, the

¹⁵¹Fehl, 1992, 210.

lengths he went to achieve this has led to the suspicion he apparently sought to avoid.

Another painting of Lucretia which appears to attempt to avoid too much prurient content is an image executed by Paolo Veronese in the 1580s, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (fig.173).¹⁵² Considering his Venetian background, with its strong tradition of female nudes - and in particular semi-clad and nude Lucretias - it is perhaps surprising that Veronese's version of the suicide depicts Lucretia decently covering herself as she strikes the fatal blow. Painted towards the end of the century, this perhaps reflects the effects of the atmosphere of the Counter-Reformation and Veronese's own experience of interrogation by the Inquisition. It is also typical of Veronese to design his scene with much tact, not dwelling on the drama and the sexual excitement, but on the quiet calm in the moment before Lucretia falls. Expressed in her face is great woe; not the transported grief or even triumph of earlier images, but silent sadness.

The ambiguity caused by the exposure of the breast by the mid to late sixteenth century is clearly illustrated in a painting, possibly by Parmigianino (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum fig.174).¹⁵³ Although perhaps related to Veronese's image, as it is similar in composition and in the poignant attitude of Lucretia as she turns her head towards the darkness, the revelation of the single lusciously plump breast inevitably eroticises the image. This uncovered breast recalls depictions of *Maria lactans* from earlier in the century, but the depiction is too sensuous to be anything other than erotic, an effect which is heightened by the

¹⁵²Fehl, 1992, 210-213.

¹⁵³Heinz, 1981, 105-118.



fig.173 Paolo Veronese, *The Death of Lucretia*, 1580s, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



fig.174 Parmigianino?, *The Death of Lucretia*, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



fig.175 Guido Reni?, *The Death of Lucretia*, 17th century, formerly in the Lansdowne Collection.



fig.176 Anon, Florentine, *The Rape of Lucretia*, mid-seventeenth century, Rome, Accademia di S. Luca.



fig.177 Artemisia Gentileschi, *The Death of Lucretia*, 1621, Genoa, Palazzo Cattaneo-Adorno.



fig.178 Rembrandt, *The Death of Lucretia*, 1664, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art.

proximity of the dagger and the knowledge of the sexual content of Lucretia's story. In the light of such images as these, it is not surprising that *Maria lactans* lost popularity so dramatically during the course of the *Cinquecento*. Lucretia was after all renowned for her chastity, and in this image where she reveals a breast only a baby is needed to turn it into a breastfeeding scene. Yet the painting contains heightened eroticism. The Virgin Mary's honour required protection from such ambivalent imagery in the religious struggles of the *Cinquecento*.

Conclusion.

The vital element of Lucretia's story is her suicide. If she had been raped by Tarquin but had chosen to live and see the vengeance wreaked on the Tarquin family, she may still have gone down in history as the woman who sparked off the war which made Rome a republic but she would not have drawn such huge attention from so many writers and artists. Although both the founding legends and the religious myths of Classical Rome are full of stories of rape and suicide, none come together in quite such a personal and individual manner, where one act sparks the other: a woman who is raped finds the event to be so devastating she decides to take autonomous action and end her own life.

The figure of Lucretia has never been entirely free from ambiguities. Even in her pagan past two strands of tradition may have existed simultaneously: the Etruscan adulteress and the Roman heroine, although the former has become obscured by the complete dominance of the history of the Roman Empire. Subsequently, suspicion was thrown on her morality at an early date in the Christian

era by St. Augustine. Although throughout the Middle Ages this was eclipsed by the attempt to establish her as a chaste Christianised martyr, the doubt cast by St. Augustine ensured that she could easily be exploited when nudity and sexuality in art became acceptable in the sixteenth century.

The artists who chose to represent Lucretia in the fifteenth century followed cultural attitudes expressed in the literature of the period, and used her as a role model for young wives and as a figure of political propaganda. Raphael and the artists who followed him at the beginning of the sixteenth century were interested in the wider implications of her story, relating as it did to the extremes of human experience. Many others were interested mainly in the erotic elements of the story.

In seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, numerous paintings of both the suicide and the rape of Lucretia were executed. Many of these tended towards a concentration on the erotic content. The theatrical drama of the Baroque resulted in images of the suicide scene which according to some, appear to depict Lucretia experiencing orgasm, as in a painting, possibly by Guido Reni, formerly in the Lansdowne Collection (fig.175).¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile rape scenes became markedly more ambiguous, as, for example, in an anonymous Florentine painting of the mid-seventeenth century, in Rome, in which Lucretia does not appear at all unwilling to give into her attacker (fig.176).¹⁵⁵

In contrast to these later examples, Veronese's Lucretia has not lost her modesty, and she does not want to die, but has rationally decided that suicide is her

¹⁵⁴Garrard, 1989, 225.

¹⁵⁵Garrard, 1989, 226.

only option. It was from Veronese's example that a more positive tradition of images of Lucretia developed in the seventeenth century.¹⁵⁶ Artemisia Gentileschi's 1621 version of the suicide, in the Palazzo Cattaneo-Adorno, Genoa, perhaps because from the hands of a woman, and one who had suffered rape, presents a distinctly non-sexual Lucretia, gravely meditating on the rights and wrongs of suicide and also perhaps her possible pregnancy (fig.177).¹⁵⁷ Rembrandt also, in his two versions, now in Washington and Minneapolis, both fully-clothed Lucretias, achieves a greater depth of meaning and thought-provoking intensity (fig.178). Both these painters were possibly influenced by Veronese's precedent.¹⁵⁸

It can be argued that the reasons for the popularity of the image of Lucretia committing suicide or being raped during the Renaissance lie purely in the negative attitudes towards women which were inherent in the culture of the period. But the constant repetition of the breast and knife motif also had positive connotations. Both Mary Garrard and Duncan Macmillan have drawn attention to the maternal aspects of Lucretia as she appears in paintings by Artemisia Gentileschi and Gavin Hamilton respectively. Garrard has claimed that the unusual pose of Artemisia's first painting of Lucretia, holding her breast from underneath and squeezing the nipple, recalls *Maria lactans* images and suggests Lucretia's meditation on her possible impending motherhood after being raped. According to Garrard, this twist on the story is unprecedented, and the juxtapositioning of the knife and the breast represents the opposing forces of death and life.¹⁵⁹ Macmillan on the other hand suggests that Lucretia was particularly important in the neo-classicised art of revolutionary France

¹⁵⁶Fehl, 1992, 214.

¹⁵⁷Garrard, 1989, 227-239; Jaffé, 1993.

¹⁵⁸Keuls, 1992; Bal, 1991; Garrard, 1989, 239.

¹⁵⁹Garrard, 1989, 227.

because of her willingness to give up her body for the greater good and he compares her to the figure of Roman Charity.¹⁶⁰

But these comparisons can be made with any image of Lucretia. Breasts mean women, are the essence of women. To Italian renaissance viewers the motif of the uncovered female breast in a painting would have had various connotations - security, comfort, the love of a mother, chastity and women's enduringness and faith. The coupling of the breast with the sword also indicated men's fear of women, woman's attractiveness, sexual danger and her supposed propensity for sexual infidelity. Men's continual confusion and ambivalence in relation to women is encapsulated in this image of the breast and the dagger. Lucretia fits, then, into a long tradition of women with exposed breasts and this is perhaps why, despite a very different history and notoriety, she appears to have been almost interchangeable with the image of Cleopatra, the subject of the next chapter.

¹⁶⁰Macmillian, 1994, 87.



fig.179 Piero di Cosimo, *Cleopatra*, c1485-90, Chantilly, Musée Condé.

Chapter Five: Cleopatra.

Around 1485-90, the Florentine artist Piero di Cosimo executed a painting, the subject and true function of which has never been satisfactorily explained (Chantilly, Musée Condé, fig.179).¹ This painting is claimed by many to be a portrait of Simonetta Vespucci, a celebrated Florentine beauty associated with the Medici family; but others claim that the painting represents Cleopatra, the ancient Egyptian Queen. In fact there are several reasons why it is unlikely to be a portrait of a contemporary woman yet, if it is a painting of Cleopatra, then it is very unusual because to that date few such examples of representations which include blatant exposure of her breasts exist.

The story of Cleopatra was however a popular subject for late renaissance and baroque artists and the accepted iconography which made her immediately recognisable to viewers during this period usually included her naked breasts. She was generally depicted in varying states of undress, at the moment before her suicide or actually dying, grasping an asp, the instrument of her death. The motif of the breast is once more closely related to the demise of a woman. Indeed, in many paintings of Cleopatra it is only the appearance of the poisonous snake, as opposed to a dagger, which distinguishes her from Lucretia.

None of the early primary sources which document the death of Cleopatra indicate that the snake-bite which reputedly killed her was located on her breast. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore how and why this association between

¹For a summary of the arguments for and against this painting being of Cleopatra see Bacci, 1976, 86. Also, Fermor, 1993, 93-100 and Olszewski, 2002.

Cleopatra, her breasts and her death developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and how the images of Cleopatra which date to that period fit into the wider focus of nurture/torture iconography.

Historically, Cleopatra, alone among the female protagonists discussed in this thesis, suffers from a generally negative reputation. This reputation is, for the most part, the product of propaganda; despite the fact that Cleopatra has far more historical authenticity than Lucretia, her story, as we know it today, is no less of a myth than the story of Lucretia. Cleopatra's Roman enemies constructed a version of her life which portrayed her as immoral and sexually voracious and this reputation has never been fully dispelled. As a result it might appear, in the first instance, that paintings of her dating to the late *Quattrocento* and *Cinquecento* fit easily into the category of sexualised subject matter which became widely popular during this period. But quite apart from the ordinary difficulty of analysing even those paintings whose motives seem to be transparently aesthetic and sexually titillating, because of the very nature of the breast-specific iconography which denoted Cleopatra during the period, it is clear that something far more complex than the simple representation of an infamously voluptuous woman was implied in paintings of her.

In fact, despite her status as a wicked woman, Cleopatra brings this study full circle, back to the Virgin Mary, her apparent antithesis. This is due in part to a tradition, dating back to Cleopatra's own self-promotion, which associates her with goddesses such as Isis and Venus. The association draws her into a wider tradition of pagan goddesses of whom Mary was the Christian embodiment. One of the main virtues of many goddesses was their ability to reproduce and nourish children, because of the wider implication of fecundity and fertility in any given society. In

many examples of paintings of Cleopatra from the late fifteenth century and sixteenth century, it appears that she is not only being bitten on the nipple but that she is also actually breastfeeding the viper. Her breasts are simultaneously being suckled and attacked.

It is possible that because of Cleopatra's associations with sex and also the goddess of love, Venus, her character was used in Piero di Cosimo's painting, as a personification of the vice Luxuria, which was closely bound with the vice Lust. As an allegory of Luxuria conflated with the persona of Cleopatra, just as Lucretia was associated with personifications of the virtue Chastity, the meaning of the painting is explicable. It may be, in part, from an association between Luxuria and Cleopatra that the tradition stemmed of connecting Cleopatra's breast with her death in visual representations, because Luxuria was often depicted in hell suffering an attack to her breasts by reptiles. In early images of Lucretia stabbing herself with exposed breasts, the breasts are associated with her chastity. In the case of Cleopatra, her uncovered breasts denote exactly the opposite. But in later images the categorisation of evil woman, to which Cleopatra was subject, becomes blurred and far from easily definable.

The Creation of a Myth.

Cleopatra's story has exerted a fascination for over two thousand years because of its dangerous, exotic and sexual nature. There is however very little surviving Egyptian primary source material from which a picture of the events of Cleopatra's life and her character can be established.² All the surviving ancient texts

²For an examination of ancient sources for Cleopatra see Bullough, 1964, 5, 218-238

which allude to Cleopatra relate the tale from a Roman point of view and since by the end of her life Cleopatra was an enemy of the Roman State, she was characterised by almost all her early biographers as a morally corrupt, sexually deviant woman.

The facts about her life have been more or less established by historians.³ Cleopatra was Queen of Egypt from around 52BC, the last monarch of the Ptolemaic dynasty which had ruled Egypt for three hundred years. When she became Queen, the capital city, Alexandria, was volatile, and the authority of the monarchy was not strong.⁴ In an attempt to regain control, Cleopatra's father, Ptolemy XII, had allied himself with Rome, and although Egypt still retained formal independence, it was becoming more and more influenced by the Roman Empire.⁵ It was apparently Cleopatra's aim to reassert the power of her position and she became consort to Julius Caesar and, after his death, Mark Antony, bearing them both children. These liaisons were politically motivated and are not proof of a promiscuous nature.⁶ By giving birth to the children of powerful Roman leaders she probably hoped to extend her power-base (possibly even as far as Rome) and secure the monarchy for her offspring. There is no evidence to suggest that she was any more vicious, cruel or power-crazed than preceding Ptolemaic monarchs. According to Plutarch, however, she was highly intelligent, charming, witty and well-educated in the Hellenistic style and was also a skilled politician.⁷

and Grant, 1972, 239-245.

³Grant, 1982, 39. Facts which most historians agree on are drawn from Ellis, 1947; Lindsay, 1971; Bradford, 1972; Grant, 1972. More controversial details are discussed in the aforementioned work by Grant, 1982, and Pomeroy, 1984.

⁴Grant, 1982, 48, 197.

⁵ Grant, 1982, 17; Pomeroy, 1984, 25.

⁶Grant, 1982, 197-198; Pomeroy, 1984, 24-28.

⁷Plutarch, 'The Life of Marc Antony', in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*,

As a member of the triumvirate which took control of Rome after the murderers of Julius Caesar had been defeated at Phillipi in 42BC, Mark Antony was a very powerful man. He met the Egyptian Queen in 41BC when on campaign to annex Parthia. Their relationship was intermittent, on several occasions he returned to Rome or went on long war expeditions, leaving Cleopatra ruling Egypt alone. But he spent the last years of his life with Cleopatra in Egypt and they ruled together, Antony bestowing many of his dominions on Cleopatra and their three children.⁸

Another member of the triumvirate and Julius Caesar's heir, Octavius, saw in the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra an opportunity to consolidate his own power. He started a propaganda campaign against Cleopatra, playing on Roman suspicions of the foreign Queen. Subsequently he gathered an army, advanced on Egypt and met and defeated Antony and Cleopatra's forces at the Battle of Actium in 31BC. When it became clear that all was lost, Antony and Cleopatra returned to Alexandria where he committed suicide and Cleopatra began to make preparations for her own death, which she effected soon after Octavius' entry into the city. Cleopatra died in 30BC and in the following year Egypt was annexed by Rome.⁹ With Mark Antony dead, Octavius fought and defeated Roman republican factions and in 27BC declared himself Emperor and became Augustus.¹⁰ Thus the republic of Rome, which came into being with the suicide of Lucretia, came to an end with the suicide of Cleopatra.

1965, 9, 27.

⁸Grant, 1982, 17-18, 48, 123, 197.

⁹Grant, 1982, 17-18.

¹⁰Eder, 1990, 71-122.

Ancient Sources for the Life of Cleopatra.

Cleopatra's life and involvement with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony were politically crucial in the development of the Roman Empire. As a result she is referred to in most surviving ancient Roman histories. However, few sources survive from the actual time of Cleopatra's life or the decades thereafter.¹¹ Only from histories dating to the first century AD, which were evidently based on earlier sources, can some indication of contemporary attitudes to the Egyptian Queen be gleaned.¹² Generally it would appear that Octavius' propaganda against her, and his subsequent victory over her, ensured that she was treated negatively by her contemporaries as well as later Roman authors. Some proof of this can be found in the works of Augustan poets such as Propertius, Virgil and Horace.¹³

For Propertius, Cleopatra was 'the harlot queen' and Romans should 'implore long life for Augustus' for having saved them from 'a woman's tyranny'.¹⁴ Similarly, Horace accuses Cleopatra of being '... a frenzied queen ... plotting ruin 'gainst the Capitol and destruction to the Empire, with her polluted crew of creatures foul with lust'.¹⁵ Virgil, in *The Aeneid*, includes the battle of Actium in a vision of Rome's future on the shield of Aeneas and refers to Cleopatra as Antony's curse.¹⁶

¹¹Grant, 1972, 239.

¹²Grant, 1972, 239-241. Grant discusses many early sources: the writings of Julius Caesar, Livy, Nicolaus of Damascus, the tutor of Cleopatra's children, Josephus, the first century Jewish author, and Appian. Many of these have been lost, but those that do survive are generally negative towards Cleopatra.

¹³Grant, 1972, 244. For a discussion on Augustan poetry commemorating the battle of Actium see Gurval, 1995, 137-278.

¹⁴Propertius, *Elegies*, 1912 Loeb ed., 3.11.39, 50-52.

¹⁵Horace, *The Odes and Epodes*, 1988 Loeb ed., Ode 37.

¹⁶Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 1956 ed., 8, 698.

However, the most complete and vivid biography of Cleopatra, and one well known during the Renaissance, is found in *The Life of Marc Antony*, written by Plutarch in the latter half of the first century AD.¹⁷ Although evidently inspired by the romance of the story of Antony and Cleopatra, Plutarch is generally condemnatory, deploring the waste of Antony's fine Roman qualities and the deviousness of Cleopatra. His description of Cleopatra and her affair with Antony was imaginative rather than factual, but his view was the base from which the traditional view of Cleopatra as a sensuous, witch-like siren developed.¹⁸ Plutarch states that Cleopatra

‘... had already seen for herself the power of her beauty to enchant Julius Caesar... and she expected to conquer Antony even more easily ... She therefore provided herself with as lavish a supply of gifts, money and ornaments as her exalted position and the prosperity of her kingdom made it appropriate to take, but she relied above all upon her physical presence and the spell and enchantment which it could create.’¹⁹

This is also the tone taken by other early writers. Subsequently, in the second century AD, Dio Cassius' *Roman History* sums up Cleopatra:

¹⁷Plutarch, 'The Life of Marc Antony', in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 271-349. For studies in Plutarch see Russell, 1973, especially relevant, 135-142; Wardman, 1974 and Duff, 1999.

¹⁸From Scott-Kilvert's introduction to Plutarch, 'The Life of Marc Antony', in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 12.

¹⁹Plutarch, 'The Life of Marc Antony', in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 25.

‘Cleopatra was of insatiable passion and insatiable avarice; she was swayed often by laudable ambition, but often by overweening effrontery. By love she gained the title of Queen of the Egyptians and when she hoped by the same means to win also that of Queen of the Romans, she failed of this and lost the other besides.’²⁰

Cleopatra appeared to oppose all the accepted Roman morals with her luxurious lifestyle and her willingness to go to any lengths to achieve her political aim.²¹ She was a foreigner, known only for her previous dalliance with Julius Caesar, a powerful threat and, what was worse, a woman. According to Dio Cassius, Octavius told his men that the Egyptians were guilty of many faults, but ‘Worst of all, [they] are slaves to a woman and not to a man.’²²

Thus the myth of Cleopatra was formed. Only in death was Cleopatra seen to have achieved a kind of Roman nobility akin to the virtue Lucretia was deemed to possess. Plutarch informs us that Octavius thought that ‘... [Cleopatra’s] presence would greatly enhance the splendour of his triumphal procession in Rome’.²³ Cleopatra learned of this and contrived to commit suicide through several means, first by stabbing herself and then by starvation and finally by having an asp hidden in a basket of figs and brought to her. Octavius was ‘... vexed at Cleopatra’s death, and yet he could not but admire the nobility of her spirit ...’.²⁴ Plutarch also reports the

²⁰Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 1916 Loeb ed., 6, 51.15.4, see Grant, 1972, 243.

²¹Pomeroy, 1985, 25-28.

²²Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 1916 Loeb ed., 5, 50.24.

²³Plutarch, ‘The Life of Marc Antony’, in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 75.

²⁴Plutarch, ‘The Life of Marc Antony’, in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 86.

dying words of one of Cleopatra's female companions who committed suicide with her: 'It is well done, and fitting for a princess descended of so many royal kings'.²⁵ She had chosen death rather than slavery and this was seen as a redeeming feature.

Horace too declared that she,

'... seeking to die a nobler death, showed for the dagger's point no woman's fear ... courageous, too, to handle poisonous asps ... scorning, in sooth, the thought of being borne, a queen no longer ... to grace a glorious triumph.'²⁶

According to the ancient texts, Cleopatra, as Queen, had brought only shame to her country.²⁷ What is more, because she had been prone to the weaknesses of women and had brought sex into the arena of politics she had led astray one great Roman leader and completely ruined another. However, it was allowed that her action to avoid the shame of being displayed as a token of Octavius' triumph did display nobility of spirit and a fearlessness which was unusual in a woman.²⁸

²⁵Plutarch, 'The Life of Marc Antony', in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 86.

²⁶Horace, *The Odes and Epodes*, 1988 Loeb ed., Ode 37.

²⁷Pomeroy, 1985, 25-27.

²⁸As noted in the previous chapter, the suicide of women has generated much debate particularly in feminist literature of the last twenty to thirty years, see in particular Higgonnet, 1986, 68-83. Women's suicide has held a great attraction for men, artists and writers in particular. For a close analysis of how visual and verbal representation of beautiful, dying or dead women are made aesthetically pleasing and are a constantly repeated leitmotif of art see Bronfen, 1992. The attitude that Cleopatra must have had a man's courage to commit suicide echoes reactions to Lucretia's suicide and also later Christian reactions to the bravery of female martyrs, saints and holy women who were deemed to have achieved a status of maleness, as discussed in Chapter Three.

During the early Christian period, when the Roman Empire was in decline, Cleopatra's reputation as a lover of sins of the flesh could only serve to condemn her in the eyes of the Christian fathers, for whom chastity was a spiritual virtue.²⁹ However, Tertullian, in the 2nd-3rd century AD, appears to have agreed with Horace in the matter of Cleopatra's death when he used her as an example to encourage persecuted Christians to accept their fate in becoming martyrs. Cleopatra was a woman who 'willingly embraced the beasts,' he tells us, 'rather than fall into the hands of her enemy, she placed snakes against her, reptiles more terrifying than bulls or bears.'³⁰

But there is a big ethical difference between martyrdom and suicide; in the first case one has no choice; in the second, one must make an active decision. From the fifth century AD suicide was increasingly condemned by Christians in the wake of St. Augustine's invective.³¹ Augustine assures us that 'greatness of spirit is not the right term to apply to one who has killed himself because he lacked the strength to endure hardships, or another's wrongdoing.'³² Cleopatra's heroic death could no longer redeem her.

Mediaeval Literary Sources and Early Images in Art.

Like the story of Lucretia, the legend of the Egyptian Queen, Cleopatra, was evidently preserved in some form through the early Middle Ages, so that she

²⁹Riley, 2000, 174-180.

³⁰Tertullian, *Tre Opere Parentiche: Ad Martyras*, 1961, 4,6.

³¹St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 1972 ed., 1,17-36.

³²St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 1972 ed., 1, 22.

survived as a well known historical figure in late mediaeval Italy.³³ Her name appeared in several important literary sources dating to the late Middle Ages and Renaissance and for the most part it is clear that her notoriety was due to her reputation as an amoral woman. Plutarch was not widely known in the fourteenth century, but well-read writers such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio were acquainted to some degree with versions of several ancient works which document her story, including Josephus' *Jewish Wars*, Livy's *From the Foundings of the City*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*.³⁴ This is reflected in the hostile attitude taken towards Cleopatra by such writers. Petrarch, in *The Triumph of Love*, tells us:

First of all, [of] Caesar, whom in Egypt
Cleopatra bound, amid the flowers and grass.
Now over him there is triumph; and 'tis well,
Since he, though conqueror of the world, was vanquished,
That Love, who vanquished him, should have the glory.'³⁵

³³ For a discussion on the survival of ancient texts through to the Middle Ages see Reynolds and Wilson, 1974 and the introduction to Reynolds, 1983.

³⁴ Pade, 1995, 169-183. The first Italian translation of Plutarch's *Life of Marc Antony* was done in 1404-05 by Leonardo Bruni and became well known soon after, Pade, 1995, 182. See also Oakeshott, 1961, 7-8 and Russell, 1973, 146-149. For a brief discussion on the classical learning of Petrarch and Boccaccio see Pfeiffer, 1976, 3-24. See also Hankley, 1958, 208-226. For Boccaccio's general influences see Branca, 1976, particularly relevant 97-122. For Boccaccio's sources in *The Fates of Illustrious Men* see the introduction of the translation into English by Hall, 1965, x-xi. For his sources in *Concerning Famous Women* see the introduction of the translation into English by Guarino, 1963, xxix-xxxi and in particular 256. See also Jocelyn, 1997. My thanks to Drs. Carlo Caruso and Robert Wilson in the Italian Department of St. Andrews University for help in this area.

³⁵ Petrarch, 'Triumphus Cupidinis' in *Rime, Trionfi e Poesie Latine*, 1951, 1, 90, 489, translation from, 'The Triumph of Love', in *The Triumphs*, 1962 ed., 1, 90.

He mentions her a second time in *The Triumph of Fame*, describing her as being ‘afame with wrongful love’.³⁶ Meanwhile, in *The Divine Comedy*, Dante condemned ‘luxurious Cleopatra, seen with Helen ...,’ to the inferno with other infamous carnal sinners, as punishment for her licentiousness.³⁷ Christine de Pizan, generally a great defender of women, did not even mention her in *The Book of the City of Ladies* at the beginning of the *Quattrocento*.³⁸

Cleopatra appears seldom in painting before the end of the fifteenth century, only occasionally figuring in manuscript illumination, and on *cassone* and other household decoration.³⁹ In these instances she generally represented a woman who had led a morally questionable life and therefore came to a bad end. Although it can be taken as read that these images were interpreted differently by different viewers, the intention of choosing Cleopatra as subject matter in these cases was most likely to have been to illustrate the dangerous nature of love and the contrast between Cleopatra’s sexual nature and the virtue of heroines such as Lucretia.⁴⁰ In this emblematic role, Cleopatra poses a threat as a powerful woman, capable of leading the best of men to destruction.

Consider for example the French miniature illustrating the *Death of Antony and Cleopatra* from a fifteenth-century copy of Boccaccio’s *Concerning Famous Women* in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, (MS.fr.12420, fol.129v,) dating to around 1402 (fig.180). Fully and beautifully dressed in contemporary costume, Cleopatra

³⁶Petrarch, ‘Triumphus Fame’ in *Rime, Trionfi e Poesie Latine*, 1951, 2, 106, 541, translation from, ‘The Triumph of Fame’, in *The Triumphs*, 1962 ed., 2, 106.

³⁷Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 1993 ed., Canto 5, 1, 63.

³⁸See Quilligan, 1991, 174.

³⁹Wharton Vanderzani, 1983.

⁴⁰See Baskins, 1998, 1-25, for a discussion on multi-readings of *cassone* panels.



fig.180 French Manuscript, *The Death of Antony and Cleopatra*, c1402, from a copy of Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms.fr.12420, fol.129v.

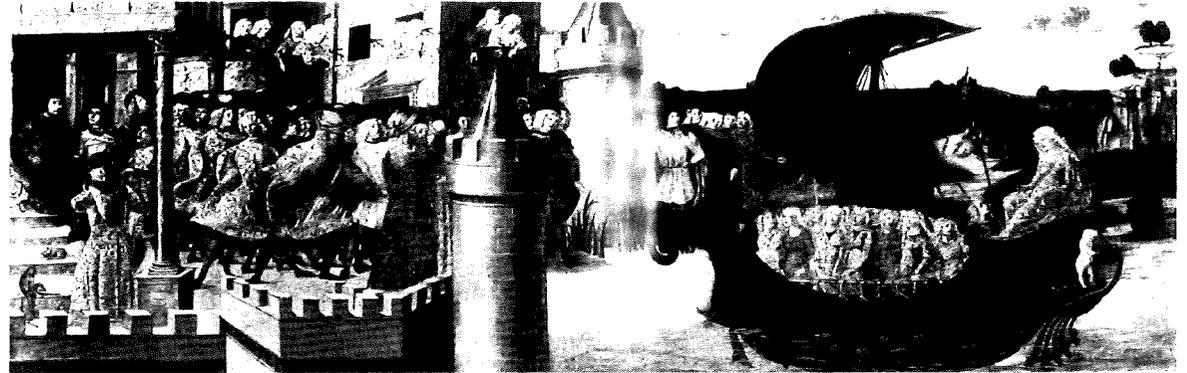


fig.181 Neroccio de'Landi (workshop), *The Visit of Cleopatra to Antony*, 1480-1495, North Carolina Museum of Art.

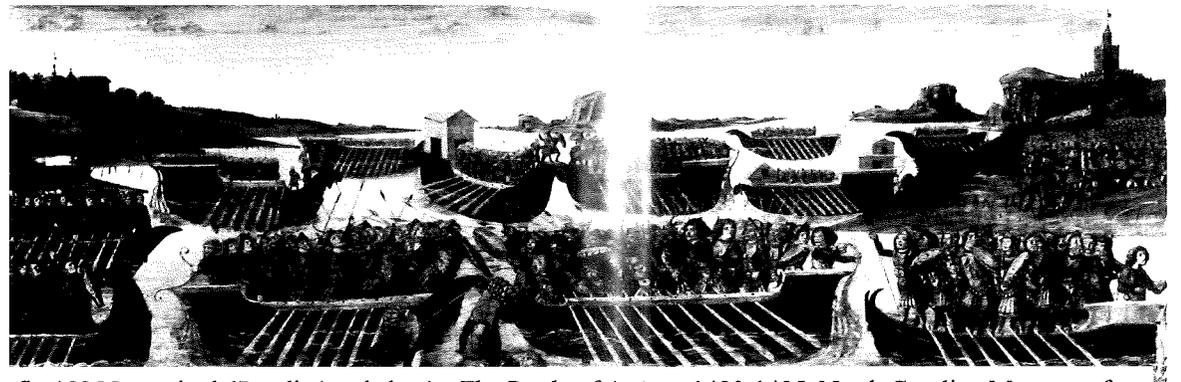


fig.182 Neroccio de'Landi (workshop), *The Battle of Actium*, 1480-1495, North Carolina Museum of Art.

sits on her throne with two asps attached to her arms. However, there are small indications in this image that Cleopatra's death is a just punishment for an evil woman. The unbalanced and uncomfortable angles of her body in death indicate disharmony, a mediaeval signifier of lack of virtue.⁴¹ This contrasts with many other death-scenes in the manuscript, where virtuous and heroic females meet their noble ends.

Instances where Cleopatra's story was illustrated in household decoration also tended to have moralistic overtones. An example of this can be found on two painted panels now in the North Carolina Museum of Art, from the workshop of Nercoccio de'Landi dating to 1480-1495, (which may have been *cassone* panels or may have been set into the walls of a room). These have been identified as representing the subjects of *The Visit of Cleopatra to Antony* and *The Battle of Actium* (figs 181-182).⁴²

The depiction of *The Visit of Cleopatra to Antony* is evidently a story of love and passion, for the boat of the beautiful woman is steered by Eros and at Antony's feet sit an ape and a dog, symbolic of his lust. Although this image is not as directly threatening as an image of death, because it is coupled with the depiction of *The Battle of Actium* it can be interpreted as a cautionary tale. In the fifteenth century love, although extolled often in poetry and literature, was also often blamed for causing excessive pain and making men (and women) act in irrational, and therefore self-destructive, ways.⁴³ In the second panel we see Antony at the battle in which he

⁴¹Buettner, 1996, 65.

⁴²Callman, 1980, 10-12; Shapley, 1966, 154-155.

⁴³Kelso, 1978, 157-164.

has engaged because of his love for Cleopatra, which he is to lose, and the shame of which will cause him to take his own life.⁴⁴

Disharmony is again implied in an illustration of *The Death of Antony and Cleopatra* which appeared in the first printed version of Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*, dating to 1473, now known as the Ulm Boccaccio. (London, British Library, G.1449 Folio LXXXIXV, folio Ixxxv, fig.183).⁴⁵ The scene depicts Antony utterly cast down, he still wears his crown which denotes him as a nobleman, but he has not died with any dignity, he is sprawled on the floor. Cleopatra is in the process of dying and is collapsed on her knees beside him. Such are the fates of those who live morally questionable lives. This is a very early example of an illustration for a printed text, and was repeated in many later reprints and would have been widely available across Europe. Although produced by a German craftsman, it may well have been known by and influenced Italian artists who depicted Cleopatra.⁴⁶

Boccaccio was, in fact, responsible for the fullest accounts of Cleopatra's story dating to the fourteenth century. In both *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* (*The*

⁴⁴A third panel from the workshop of Neroccio de'Landi, depicting *The Triumph of Chastity*, provides us with a useful comparison to the first two panels. (Callman, 1980, 9-10.) In *The Triumph of Chastity*, very prominently situated at the front of a group of chaste maidens, is Lucretia, identified by the fact that she is plunging a dagger into her breast. In her role as exemplar to young newly-wed wives, she contrasts favourably with Cleopatra in the other panel, who loses all at the battle of Actium because of her lack of moral fibre.

⁴⁵As was pointed out to me by Dr. Louise Bourdua, the composition of *The Death of Antony and Cleopatra* from the Ulm Boccaccio is clearly related to the same scene in the French manuscript of c1402, BN Ms.fr.12420, fol.129v, fig.180.

⁴⁶For a full analysis of the implications of this print in the *Quattrocento* and also a subsequent illustration from an edition of Petrarch's *Triumphs*, see Hamer, 1993, 24-44.

Fates of Illustrious Men, 1359) and *De Claris Mulieribus* (*Concerning Famous Women*, 1361), he tells her tale in very similar terms and in both he condemns her, most harshly of all in the latter.⁴⁷ He accuses her of being ‘almost the prostitute of oriental Kings’ and declares that ‘she became known throughout the world for her greed, cruelty and lustfulness.’⁴⁸

⁴⁷Boccaccio, ‘The Life of Marc Antony’, in *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, 1965 ed., 6, 170-174; ‘The Life of Cleopatra’, in *Concerning Famous Women*, 1963 ed., 86, 192-197.

⁴⁸Boccaccio, ‘The Life of Cleopatra’, in *Concerning Famous Women*, 1963 ed., 86, 192-197. It is interesting to consider the political background of fourteenth century Italy when reading Boccaccio’s accounts of Cleopatra. In particular *The Fates of Illustrious Men* contains a distinct political message and Boccaccio states this purpose clearly in his introduction to the work: ‘I was wondering how the labour of my studies could benefit the state when I recalled the conduct of illustrious princes. These rulers ... [are] so attracted to vice and debauchery [and] are so unrestrained ...’ he wishes to ‘call them back to the straight road’ by shattering ‘an illusion that may cause their death.’, Boccaccio, *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, 1965 ed., 1, 1-2. The work illustrates Boccaccio’s hatred of the avarice and extravagant mode of living of many of the tyrannical rulers of his day and is a list of examples of tyrannical rulers from biblical and classical history who could not restrain their desires, exploited their positions and as a result fell into misery and death, see Hall’s introduction to Boccaccio, 1965 ed. Boccaccio’s last chapter deals with more contemporary figures, including Walter, Duke of Athens, who took control of Florence for a brief spell from 1342-1343, but, as Boccaccio’s epitaph to the tale states, ‘Even the most savage of tyrants cannot withstand the opposition of free citizens’. Walter was expelled before a year had passed and was killed in battle a few years later, Boccaccio, *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, 1965 ed., 6, 228-234. It is as a tyrant, then, that Marc Antony is characterised in the chapter on his life earlier in the book and Cleopatra is his partner in crime. Her behaviour, as described by Boccaccio in both *The Fates of Illustrious Men* and *Concerning Famous Women*, is typically tyrannical. In the introductory paragraph of ‘The Life of Cleopatra’ in *Concerning Famous Women*, he tells us that ‘... she came to rule through crime,’ and goes on to explain that ‘burning with the desire to rule ... [she] poisoned the innocent fifteen-year-old boy who was both her brother and her husband, and ruled the kingdom alone.’ Boccaccio describes how Cleopatra duped Caesar into giving her the rule of Egypt, and having won it through crime she gave herself over to pleasure. This consisted of stripping her lovers of gold and jewels and raiding temples and sacred places of their treasures. Next she ensnared Antony and inveigled new kingdoms from him, finally demanding the Roman Empire which ‘had just been gained after so many centuries with such difficulty and bloodshed, through the death



fig.183 Ulm Boccaccio, *The Banquet of Cleopatra and The Death of Antony and Cleopatra*, 1473, London, British Library, G.1449 Folio LXXXIXV, folio Ixxxi v.



fig.186 Botticelli, *Portrait of a Lady*, c1485, Florence, Galleria Palatina.



fig.184 Piero di Cosimo, *Mars and Venus*, Berlin, Staatliche Museen.



fig.187 Manuscript, French translation of Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*, *The Death of Cleopatra*, c1405, London, British Library,



fig.185 Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*, c1488, Lugano, Thyssen Collection.



fig.188 Manuscript, French translation of Boccaccio's *Fates of Illustrious Men*, *The Deaths of Antony and Cleopatra*, c1480, London, British Library Royal MS 14 E.V.

Piero di Cosimo's Painting.

In the rare early depictions of Cleopatra found in manuscripts and household decoration, Cleopatra's breasts are not exposed and there is no iconographic connection between them and her death, but her reputation was evidently negative. Clearly, when analysing Piero di Cosimo's painting of the late fifteenth century, and attempting to interpret whether or not the painting is an early example of a depiction of Cleopatra with exposed breasts, it is important, in the first instance, to determine whether or not the artist intended to portray a reputedly virtuous woman or a woman who was, at least, sexually suspect.

The widely popular argument that it is a portrait of a well known Florentine woman who was renowned for her chastity is, to a great extent, based on the inscription below the image with the name of Simonetta Vespucci. This inscription,

of so many great men and even peoples, and with so many noble deeds and battles, as if he wanted to give it away at once like the ownership of a single house!', Boccaccio, 'The Life of Cleopatra' in *Concerning Famous Women*, 1963 ed., 192-195. Cleopatra, in contrast to the republican nature of Lucretia, was a symbol of tyranny and the argument over tyranny and republicanism remained topical in Italy throughout the *Quattrocento*. For a thorough examination of the tyranny versus republicanism debate see Baron, 1955. The label of tyrant was applied to Marc Antony as far back as Plutarch, who blamed him for wanting to impose on Rome a type of absolutist government which Plutarch rejected in favour of republicanism, see Wardman, 1974, 112. Historically, while Lucretia's death heralded the establishment of Rome as a republic, Cleopatra's death allowed Augustus to declare himself Emperor. But she has not always represented tyranny, in fact, in revolutionary France she was paradoxically used as a symbol of republicanism. In this case Octavius is viewed as the tyrant and Antony and Cleopatra together as oligarchic rulers. For a full analysis of this see Hamer, 1993, 77-103, and Hughes-Hallett, 1990, 185-200. Although the label of tyrant may not have been particularly important in artistic images of Cleopatra dating to the *Quattrocento*, it was another element of her juxtaposition with Lucretia.

however, has been found to be a sixteenth-century addition.⁴⁹ Other arguments - that the snake is a symbol of eternity relating to Simonetta's early death, or a symbol of the tuberculosis from which she died; or that the snake relates to an emblem of her lover Giuliano de' Medici and the atmospheric background evokes the tragic nature of her death - appear less convincing without the inscription.⁵⁰ Although the painting was in the possession of the Vespucci family at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was not necessarily a commission of the Vespucci, in fact the patron is unknown.⁵¹

Most importantly, this generic type of female head was used commonly by Piero and similar characteristics can be found in many other of his paintings (fig. 184). It is not a remarkable face in the sense that it has no real individual characteristics, and appears bland when compared to other female profile portraits of this date, even those of other renowned beauties (figs 185-186).⁵² In fact it is a wholly idealised beauty which is represented and when the bared breasts are taken into account, the suggestion is not that it is a portrait of a respectable contemporary woman.⁵³ The profile pose does follow the style of Florentine female portraits in the late *Quattrocento*, but the exposure of the breasts would be highly unusual (if not unique, judging by the evidence of surviving portraits) if this were a portrait.⁵⁴

⁴⁹Fermor, 1993, 93.

⁵⁰Fermor, 1993, 93.

⁵¹Bacci, 1966, 86.

⁵²See Lipman, 1936, 54-102, for illustrations of many of the surviving female profile portraits dating to the *Quattrocento*.

⁵³Rogers, 1987, 291-305; Simons, 1988, 4-30; Fermor, 1993, 93. The profile pose of female portraits was used in north Italy until the end of the fifteenth century and was designed to protect ladies' honour by ensuring that they appeared unaware of the viewers' presence and did not appear to catch their eyes. See also Rogers, 1988, 47-88.

⁵⁴Although Lipman counted the Piero di Cosimo painting as a portrait, it is clearly

As discussed in previous chapters, bared breasts do not necessarily imply erotic overtones in late fifteenth-century paintings. In the cases of Mary and Charity, their lactation combined with their sanctity excused the exposure of their breasts and in the cases of Agatha and Lucretia, the exposure of the breasts represented their chastity into the sixteenth century. However, ambivalence was becoming attached to the female breast as nude images of Venus and other pagan goddesses began to appear, and even images of *Maria lactans* became questionable, so that it is highly unlikely that a straightforward portrait of a contemporary woman would have included the exposure of her breasts. A fantasised, idealised image of her might, but in that case it would not have adopted the conventional portrait pose.

These considerations militate against an identification of the subject in Piero di Cosimo's painting as Simonetta Vespucci, but what is the evidence that it is a depiction of Cleopatra? Piero's woman, with her fair skin and blond hair, does not look very Egyptian but was painted in adherence to contemporary ideas on aesthetics and feminine attractiveness, as legendary beauties such as Cleopatra generally were by fifteenth-century Italian artists.⁵⁵ The high forehead and elaborate hairstyle of

different from the other examples of female profile portraits she illustrated in her 1936 article in several respects, most importantly, that it is the only one with exposed breasts and the only one set in a landscape. Campbell states that although it was possible for women of high rank to be painted nude or partially nude, it was not likely to happen in the case of a woman with high moral standards, as Simonetta was reputed to be and indeed as all young women in Florence in the fifteenth century would have desired, see Campbell, 1990, 6.

⁵⁵See Cropper, 1976, and Rogers, 1988, for poetic descriptions of painted beauties and also Kelso, 1978, 192-209, for a summary of the debate conducted in literature concerning the nature of beauty and in particular female beauty in the Renaissance. It is by no means certain that Cleopatra was outstandingly beautiful, however from an early date the myth that she was became current: Dio Cassius stated that '... she was a woman of surpassing beauty', *Roman History*, 1916 Loeb ed., 4, 42.34.4. After all,

Piero's woman are typical of Florentine *Quattrocento* fashion and this, combined with the portrait pose, perhaps further confused the issue about the true subject of this work over the years.

The theory that this is a painting of Cleopatra has rested on the assumption that it is the painting in the house of Francesco di Sangallo mentioned by Vasari in his biography of Piero di Cosimo, which is described as 'a very beautiful head of Cleopatra by Piero, with the serpent about her neck'.⁵⁶ But of course, Vasari himself may have been mistaken about the subject matter, writing three decades after Piero's death, by which time representations of Cleopatra with bared breasts as well as serpents were abundant. In the late *Quattrocento* this was not the case. Despite the fact that Cleopatra is depicted as a kind of anti-exemplum in late mediaeval and early renaissance images of her, she is portrayed dressed respectably and her breasts remain hidden even in scenes of her death.⁵⁷ However, during the late *Quattrocento*, from round about the time that Piero's image was painted, the iconography which denoted Cleopatra changed radically. (Piero's painting has been given various dates, but Fermor puts it as early as 1485-90.⁵⁸) It became increasingly the case that images of her death depicted her with exposed breasts, often holding the snake or

how could a plain woman have successfully seduced two great Roman leaders? See also Plutarch, 'The Life of Marc Antony', in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 27; Watterson, 1991, 146-147 and Goudchaux, 2001, 210-214, for discussion on the beauty of Cleopatra.

⁵⁶ '...il qual Francesco ancora ha di mano di Piero (che non la debbo passare) una testa bellissima di Cleopatra con uno aspido avvolto al collo, e due ritratti...' Vasari, *Le Vite*, 4, 1966 ed., 71, translation from de Vere, 1996 ed. 1, 659.

⁵⁷ See also another illumination from a French translation of *Concerning Famous Women* dating to around 1405. (London, British Library Royal MS 20 C.V. folio 131v, fig.187) Again, Cleopatra is dressed in contemporary royal garb and the wounds are on her arms rather than her breasts. However, she has been placed outside and the snakes, for some reason, have transformed into griffins.

⁵⁸ Fermor, 1993, 93.

snakes to her nipple(s). This is more or less comparable with the pattern of dress and exposure found in paintings of Lucretia but in the case of Cleopatra the connection between her breasts and her death departed even more radically from the oldest sources of the story.

Plutarch states that upon finding the asp in a basket of figs, ‘... baring her arm, she held it out to be bitten.’⁵⁹ He also writes that when Octavius’ messengers found Cleopatra she was ‘... lying dead upon a golden couch dressed in her royal robes ...’, evidently she wanted to maintain her noble demeanour when discovered by Octavius and his men.⁶⁰ Dio Cassius gives similar details: ‘No one knows clearly in what way she perished for the only marks on her body were slight pin pricks on the arm. Some say she applied to herself an asp ...’ but she had ‘... put on her most beautiful apparel [and] arranged her body in most seemly fashion ...’⁶¹

However, in the eighth century Paul of Aegina was the earliest writer to suggest that Cleopatra was bitten on the breast.⁶² And although this idea was not widely taken up by writers of the following centuries, the author of the thirteenth century anonymous text, *I fatti di Cesare*, claims that at the time of her death, Cleopatra ‘undressed herself naked as she was born and went into the tomb with the serpent ... [which] she placed ... to her left breast near her heart.’⁶³ In the following century Boccaccio (although he followed the earlier version of events in *Concerning*

⁵⁹Plutarch, ‘The Life of Marc Antony’ in *Makers of Rome: Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 85.

⁶⁰Plutarch, ‘The Life of Marc Antony’ in *Makers of Rome: Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 85.

⁶¹Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 1916 Loeb ed., 6, 51.14.1.

⁶²Masson, 1930, 118.

⁶³*I fatti di Cesare* translated in Bullough, 1964, 343.

Famous Women as illustrated above) in *The Fates of Illustrious Men* states that ‘... decorated with all her royal insignia ... She bared her breasts, and after placing serpents next to them, she lay down to die.’⁶⁴ As with Lucretia, the drama of the story is heightened by suggesting that the main female protagonist died by a wound to the breast.

Thus, although not generally illustrated in artistic images, the concept of connecting Cleopatra’s breasts with her death was abroad by the early Renaissance and certainly by the time Piero’s painting was produced. In fact it was illustrated in at least one manuscript illumination which predates Piero’s painting, if only by a few years. Around 1480 the illuminator of a French translation of Boccaccio’s *Fates* adhered to the version of events related therein and portrayed Cleopatra stripped to the waist, firmly grasping two snakes which attach themselves separately to each of her nipples, (London, British Library Royal MS 14 E.V, folio fig.188). So, despite the fact that no other known instances of images of Cleopatra in the format of Piero’s painting dating to the late *Quattrocento* survive, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Vasari was right and Piero’s painting was intended to represent Cleopatra, and that the inclusion of the iconographic elements of the exposed breasts and the asp around her neck would have identified her even at that early date.

Furthermore, it is the inclusion of these two iconographic signifiers which suggest the further contention that this painting is a representation of Cleopatra in the guise of the vice Luxuria. The vice of Luxury was, in the Middle Ages, closely

⁶⁴Boccaccio, ‘The Life of Marc Antony’ in *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, 1965 ed., 6, 174.

associated with the vice of Lust, as both were considered to be aspects of women's greatest faults.⁶⁵ Personifications of Luxuria often appeared in *Last Judgements* during the early Renaissance, suffering torments as her breasts and genitals were bitten at by snakes and other reptiles, as it was believed that sinners would receive their punishment in hell via the organs by which they had most sinned (figs 189-190).⁶⁶ Ostentation and excess, not only sexually but in all sensual matters, were deemed to be the main characteristics of the vice Luxuria/Lust. As is made vividly clear by Boccaccio in particular, these were also believed to be the dominant characteristics of Cleopatra.

Let us return briefly once more to the illustration from the Ulm Boccaccio mentioned above (fig.183). On the left of the illustration of *The Death of Antony and Cleopatra* is the depiction of an episode from earlier in the story of Cleopatra's life, *The Banquet of Cleopatra*. This scene relates an incident first recorded by Pliny in his section on pearls in the *Natural History*, dating to the first century AD.⁶⁷ At a feast designed to further her attempts to ensnare Antony, Cleopatra aims to dazzle him with her wealth by dissolving a pearl in vinegar and drinking it. Pliny relates this tale (and two other instances, one very similar to his tale of Cleopatra and the pearl) in order to demonstrate how pearls were misused extravagantly, or, as he terms it, for luxury.⁶⁸

⁶⁵Kosmer, 1975, 1.

⁶⁶Kosmer, 1975, 4.

⁶⁷Pliny, *Natural History*, 1940 Loeb ed., 9, 58-60.

⁶⁸Luxury, and its anti-life qualities, was one of the main themes of the *Natural History*, and it was one of the numerous faults of the Emperor Nero, against whom many of Pliny's comments are directed. See Beagon, 1992, 17-18 and 75-79.



fig.189 Church Fresco, *Lust*, early 12th century, Tavant, France.



fig.190 Church Fresco, *Inferno*, detail, *Lust*, 1396, San Gimignano, Collegiata.



fig.191 Manuscript illumination, *Lust*, 15th century, published in Scott, M. *The History of Dress Series, Late Gothic Europe 1400-1500*, London 1980.



fig.192 *Venus/Luxuria*, Rome Vatican Library, Ms. Palat. lat 1726, fol 43r.

In his 'Life of Cleopatra' in *Concerning Famous Women*, Boccaccio retold Pliny's anecdote. The scene of the Queen dissolving a pearl in vinegar in order to impress a lover succinctly summarises the negative aspects of Cleopatra's character as it is described by Boccaccio, her extravagance and her sexual deviousness.⁶⁹ This explains its appeal to Boccaccio and his illustrator one hundred years later. In the illustration Cleopatra sits at her dinner table and throws her head back to drink what is presumably the pearl and vinegar mixture from an oyster shell. She is wearing a fashionable horned head-dress which had been condemned by various preachers, but which contemporary women across Europe insisted on wearing.⁷⁰ In art, however, it is clear that this type of accessory had specific connotations, as personifications of the vice Lust were often depicted wearing just such a head-dress (fig.191). Antony, again clearly defined as a Lord by his crown, raises his finger as if in shock or admonishment. The male attendant opens his mouth as if surprised. The leaded window in the background of the Banquet indicates that the settings, as well as the costumes, in the illustration are contemporary.

⁶⁹See Pigler, 1956, 2, 380-382, for a list of subsequent Banquet scenes. It was not commonly painted in the *Cinquecento*, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries paintings of this scene became popular with nouveaux-riches patrons, appearing on the walls of their opulent palaces. In this location, and with the scenes full of sumptuous contemporary costumes and beautiful architectural settings, the story loses most of its moral overtones and instead would have provided a diverting scene for the guests of the patrons, reflecting their own lavish lifestyles. The most famous of these is Tiepolo's *Banquet of Cleopatra* in the Palazzo Labia, Venice, which is coupled with the romantic scene of *The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra*. These sumptuous frescos were the decoration for a feast hall and this, together with the fact that Cleopatra's death scene is not included, gives credence to the idea that their function was the enjoyment of the viewer, not any serious pondering on Cleopatra's morals or fate, see Levey, 1965 and 1986, 143-166. For a discussion on how the banquet scene became an expression of patrons' status in the late sixteenth century see Tomory, 1982, 4-11. For more on pearls see de Jongh, 1975, 69-97.

⁷⁰Scott, 1980, 62, 87, 108, 126, 157; Hamer, 1993, 33.

Although the artistry of the woodcut is somewhat crude and simplistic, Cleopatra is depicted in the scene of her feast as clearly contravening the rules of modest female behaviour.⁷¹ In the fifteenth century, Francesco Barbaro was just one of many late mediaeval and renaissance writers who gave advice to women on how to conduct themselves: women, and particularly wives, should

‘... evidence modesty at all times and in all places. They can do this if they will preserve an evenness and restraint in the movements of the eyes, ... and in the movement of the hands and other parts of the body ... excessive movement of the hands and other parts of the body cannot be done without loss of dignity, and such actions are always joined to vanity ...’⁷²

The myth of Cleopatra (created by her Roman enemies), as an extravagant, sexually deviant woman, who ruined the life of a good man, was thus adapted by the isolation of the banquet scene and the death scene (the second being the consequence of the first) in the Ulm Boccaccio in order to suit contemporary concerns.⁷³

These early images of Cleopatra were didactic in nature, and consequently portrayed Cleopatra indulging in the vices she was accused of and demonstrating the end to which such vices lead.⁷⁴ It is clear from her head-dress in the illustration

⁷¹See King, 1991. This book investigates many primary sources giving directions to women on how to lead their lives and provides a vivid picture of how women were viewed from the late Middle Ages up until the eighteenth century.

⁷²Francesco Barbaro, *De re uxoria*, 1978 ed., 202.

⁷³Of course, this is true of all the varying interpretations of Cleopatra’s story throughout history. It has been thoroughly investigated by Hughes-Hallett, 1990, *passim*.

⁷⁴For information on the development of personifications of the virtues and vices see Katzenellenbogen, 1968 2nd ed., 1-13.

from the Ulm Boccaccio that there was a contemporary association of Cleopatra with personifications of the vice of Lust: guilty of both sexual and material excess, she ideally embodies the worst sins of the vices Lust and Luxuria. It is therefore very possible that her character was used as a personification of these vices in a visual image such as Piero di Cosimo's, who was responsible for innovative composition and subject matter and is also noted for his paintings with allegorical content.⁷⁵ As mentioned above, Luxury was the sin for which Cleopatra was condemned by Dante, and luxury was what angered Pliny in his pearl-in-vinegar story, retold by not only by Boccaccio in the *Trecento*, but also mentioned, as if a well-known tale, by Alberti in the *Quattrocento*, to illustrate Cleopatra's extravagance.⁷⁶ In addition, the iconographic attribute, the serpent was associated with both the vice Luxuria and the demise of Cleopatra. In the case of Luxuria/Lust, serpents eating her breasts was a visual signal of the agonies suffered by those who were guilty of such vices and in the case of Cleopatra, who was certainly one such sinner, there were literary and visual precedents for suggesting that the snake bit her on the breast.

But of course, in Piero di Cosimo's painting the snake is not actually biting Cleopatra on the breast as in the 1480 French illumination, where a snake attaches itself to each of her breasts. His painting is clearly not intended to be narrative, however, and instead can be read as emblematic and allegorical in nature, so that the snake can be interpreted as an attribute of the allegory. The woman's hairstyle, with its pearls and golden jewellery, indicates Cleopatra's taste for extravagance and luxury and also refers to the pearl-in-vinegar episode of her story. And because the asp is sensuously wound around the heavy golden necklace, a warning can be read

⁷⁵Venturi, 1985; Geronimus, 2000, 164-1170; Waldman, 2000, 171-179.

⁷⁶Alberti, 'On Painting' in *On Painting and On Sculpture*, 1972, 91.

against such a lifestyle. The bared breasts further enhance the meaning: Cleopatra was both dangerous and in danger because she lived extravagantly and did not restrain herself sexually.

The face of this woman may not appear sexually immodest to the modern viewer, but with bared breasts and situated outside in a wild landscape, not restrained by even a garden hedge, she would have represented a woman of questionable character to viewers of the late fifteenth century.⁷⁷ Compare this woman to the documented portraits of late *Quattrocento* women, kept modestly indoors, away from the dangers of disastrous sexual encounters and covered by layers of finery which simultaneously protect the property of the respective husbands and announce their wealth, and it is clear that Piero's woman is of a very different character.

A further connecting factor between Cleopatra and Luxuria is the association of both with Venus. Allegorical paintings with various layers of meaning were very popular in late fifteenth-century Florence and the humanistic trend for interpreting pagan myths as allegories of Christian stories led to pagan gods and goddesses often being used as symbols for Christian concepts.⁷⁸ Because of her position as goddess of love, and the resulting association with sexuality, Venus was often allegorically represented as mother of all the vices and was therefore seen to represent Luxuria (fig.192).⁷⁹

⁷⁷Fermor, 1993, 94. Women had to be confined in portraits as well as real life, in order to protect their honour.

⁷⁸Seznec, 1953, 112. Seznec's book fully explores the various modes of interpreting pagan myths from early Christianity and through the Middle Ages to the end of the Renaissance, pages 84-121 are particularly relevant.

⁷⁹Seznec, 1953, 109.

Cleopatra's connection with the goddess was, according to Plutarch, manufactured by Cleopatra herself. When she first appeared to Antony, sailing up the Nile in a magnificent barge, she was dressed in the guise of Venus.⁸⁰ Venus was popular subject matter in late fifteenth-century Florence and indeed the bland beauty and facial characteristics of Piero's painting of Venus and Mars (Berlin, Staatliche Museen) is not dissimilar to the Cleopatra/Luxuria image (fig.184). The close association between Venus, Cleopatra and Luxuria may have been a further level to the complicated depths of meaning the allegory of Cleopatra/Luxuria conveys.

But what could have been the function of such an image? The body of Piero di Cosimo's work was not large-scale fresco cycles or other public work for corporate patrons, but small-scale religious scenes for private devotion and secular scenes for domestic decoration.⁸¹ Indeed, despite having a good reputation and some of the wealthiest and most powerful patrons of Florence, Piero appears to have been unusual in the extent to which he concentrated on the execution of *spallieri*, an area otherwise considered rather unimportant in an artist's career.⁸² As discussed in the preceding chapter on Lucretia, the tone of imagery found on household decoration dating to the second half of the *Quattrocento* tended to be didactic and related to the duties and virtues of wives. Piero di Cosimo as a painter of such items responded to this fashion and moralistic and cautionary messages can be read in examples of his *spalliere* painting.⁸³

⁸⁰Plutarch, 'The life of Marc Antony' in *Makers of Rome: Nine Lives of Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 26.

⁸¹Fermor, 1993, 16.

⁸²Fermor, 1993, 41.

⁸³Fermor, 1993, 53.

The small size of the Cleopatra/Luxuria painting suggests that it was located in a bedroom or dressing-room, in which case its function was not very different from those images found on *spallieri* or *cassoni*. As discussed in Chapter One, in the late *Trecento* Giovanni Dominici, in his treatise on the family, had recommended that paintings situated in the home should be of a nature which would provide suitable atmosphere and educational environment for the impressionable members of the household.⁸⁴ Such an image as Piero's, representing Cleopatra as a sexual deviant, who lived ostentatiously and came to a bad end - as the snake around her neck reminds the viewer - and with this implied meaning amplified by the allegorical personification of the vice Luxuria, situated in a place where a young wife would see it every day, may well have been intended to act as a cautionary reminder of what was and what was not expected of her.

Piero may even have found it pertinent to juxtapose the chaste portrait pose with blatant nudity for his painting of Cleopatra/Luxuria, in order to turn it into an ironic comment on those Florentine ladies who sat to have their portraits taken and who vied with each other to display the most lavish and costly hairstyles and adornments, even to the point of breaking the strict laws against overly ostentatious dress.⁸⁵ In the heightened religious atmosphere of late *Quattrocento* Florence, with Savonarola encouraging women to burn all their ostentatious finery, such symbolism would have been well understood.

⁸⁴Giovanni Dominici, *Regola del governo di cura familiare parte quarta*, 1927 ed., 34, cited in Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, 115.

⁸⁵Simons, 1988, 9; Bridgeman, 2000, 209-226.

Evidently, early renaissance depictions of Cleopatra were adapted to suit contemporary requirements, as in the Ulm Boccaccio illumination, where the banquet scene is juxtaposed to the death scene so that they are inevitably linked by causality; in other words the second scene is the direct consequence of the first. The moral of such depictions is that if women are allowed by their husbands to behave inappropriately, not only will they fall, but so also will their husbands.⁸⁶ (Boccaccio's original text of the life of Cleopatra implied this and his fifteenth-century illustrator reiterated the point.⁸⁷) The general constrictions on seemingly womanly behaviour remained fairly constant throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance and on into the Baroque.⁸⁸ Above all obedience to the husband was paramount, as the fourteenth-century author Giovanni Dominici made clear when he told women that husbands should be in charge of 'your ornaments, your food, your

⁸⁶The main reason for binding a woman so tightly with rules was to ensure that her honour or chastity were not endangered. For if it were, the resultant dishonour could spell ruin for her husband and family, see King, 1991, 29. And of course it was also believed that women were insatiable when it came to sex and unable to control their lusts, so they had to be policed zealously, see King, 1991, 41-42.

⁸⁷Boccaccio's view of women was ambivalent, on the one hand he wrote *De Claris mulieribus* in order to extol the noble characters of many women of history, dedicated it to two contemporary women he admired greatly and admitted to critics that he liked women in general. However, even this text was peppered with negative comments about the nature of women. In the first book of *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, in his chapter entitled 'Against women', he informs us that 'A woman is an alluring and destructive evil' for she spends all her time beautifying herself in order to get what she wants. 'The reason of man is blinded by feminine wiles', so that even the greatest of them are brought low by the deceits of women. '... The female of the species is very greedy, quick to anger, unfaithful, oversexed, truculent, desirous more of frivolity than of wisdom'. And Cleopatra is listed as one who seduced and subdued men. But he advises, 'it is not necessary to be their slaves ... it is not necessary to divide the power given to us with them, much less to abdicate to them, ...'. He was not convinced that all women were 'artful' but, when 'hunting a Lucretia you will stumble upon a Calpurnia or a Sempronia', Boccaccio, 1965, 41-46.

⁸⁸King, 1991, 38.

talk ...' and every small detail of their lives.⁸⁹ Men were responsible for ensuring that women adhered to the expectations of society, even if this meant recourse to violence. When San Bernardino took exception to the manner in which ladies of Siena were dressed, he advised 'Were I your husband, I would give you such a mark with hands and feet that you would remember it for a long time.'⁹⁰

The character of Cleopatra provides an apparently ideal example of the disastrous consequences of allowing a woman too much power. But while at the time when her myth was first constructed, before the end of her life, the message concerned the folly of allowing women into the world of politics or war, in fifteenth-century constructions of Cleopatra, the warning concerns women in the home and the danger to their morals issuing from lack of suitable guidance from the male members of the household.

The idea of a husband being dominated by his wife was a subject for humour in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance and in art was often represented by the image of a man being ridden like a horse by his wife. Such a man was the object of ridicule, for only an idiot would allow himself to be so humiliated. The man ridden by his wife was part of the didactic imagery found on *cassone* panels and other household items such as crockery, for although funny it also had a very serious message to new couples.⁹¹ This was a similar message to the one carried by representations of Antony and Cleopatra dating to the fifteenth century.⁹² Perhaps if

⁸⁹Cited in King, 1991, 40. The first chapter of this book, particularly 38-56, addresses the obedience and subservience expected of women towards men.

⁹⁰Cited in King, 1991, 44.

⁹¹King, 1991, 188-193.

⁹²Another image of Cleopatra on a plate, after an engraving by Agostino Veneziano, (Sothebys, 8th June, 1939, 183, fig.193) suggests that Cleopatra could appear in

Antony had not allowed Cleopatra to dictate to him, and perhaps if he had given her a good beating, their respective fates would have been less unpleasant.

Taking all this into account, it does not appear too extravagant a claim that Piero's painting is indeed a representation of Cleopatra as a personification of the vice Luxuria and that it had a didactic function. As the vice Luxuria, Cleopatra signifies a warning against extravagant spending and sexual immodesty. In her case, as opposed to Lucretia's, the exposure of the breasts indicates her licentious lifestyle and the punishment which is to come to her in the afterlife. Lucretia regained her chastity through a blow to the breast, and by a similar action Cleopatra will receive her punishment. The breadth of breast symbolism allows for such mirror-images and double-edged swords.⁹³

Cleopatra is thus the antithesis of Lucretia, a personification of Lust or Luxuria in opposition to Lucretia's personification of Chastity. It is both aesthetically and psychologically pleasing that Cleopatra should deal her death-wound to the breast as Lucretia did. Symmetry then, may represent a further reason why artists fixed on this formula for depicting the death of Cleopatra from the

various locations around the home; see Lydecker, 1988, 200, 295, which gives an example of a painting 'l'chleopatra con ornamento d'oro' purchased in 1521 by Luigi Martelli to furnish a room of his house. As mentioned above, other cautionary images were found on household crockery, and so the plate with the image of Cleopatra was not necessarily merely decorative.

⁹³ Paul Watson, in an unpublished paper of 1970, and more recently in a 2002 article, Edward Olszewski, have both argued that the image represents *Lady Fiammetta* from Boccaccio's tale. Boccaccio may in part have been thinking of the story of Cleopatra when he constructed his tale of Fiammetta, as he certainly mentions her in the text. A more straightforward allegorical solution appears more likely in relation to Piero's image, however, as more in keeping with conventions of the time and the links with the opposing images of Lucretia.

end of the *Quattrocento*. Lucretia died when her marital chastity was compromised and because she did not want to be an unsuitable sexual role model for future women; Cleopatra died because she was such an unsuitable role model and (according to legend) did not know the meaning of marital fidelity.

As noted in Chapter Four, Lucretia was used as an emblem of Chastity in Petrarch's *Triumphs* and in artistic series of Illustrious or Virtuous women into the sixteenth century. It may have been that Cleopatra was similarly depicted as an emblem of the vices for which she was famed in Piero di Cosimo's painting. There is also a drawing, probably executed in Florence in the second half of the fifteenth century, but now untraced and about which little appears to be known, which depicts a woman standing alone in a landscape, with one breast exposed and a snake wound round her arm and biting her nipple (fig.194).⁹⁴ This iconography, appearing in a drawing which, judging from style, dates to a similar period as Piero di Cosimo's painting, tends to suggest that it was intended as a drawing of Cleopatra. Again this work appears to be in the didactic tradition of the fifteenth century, perhaps once more an allegory of Lust/Luxuria in contrast to Lucretia's personification of Chastity. The expression on Cleopatra's face is grave, her hair flows wild and free (much as her life had been) but she raises a finger to the sky and she communicates to the viewer a message about her imminent fate and possibly the judgement from God which will follow her - and everyone's - death.

⁹⁴A photograph of this drawing was donated to the Warburg Institute, London, by E. Schilling, but the drawing's whereabouts are unknown as are its provenance, although it was last known to have been in the possession of a Dr M. Rech, Bonn at the end of the Second World War. A tentative attribution to Filippino Lippi has been made, and although this is unlikely, it may have come from his workshop. My thanks to Elizabeth McGrath in the photograph collection at the Warburg for help with this matter.



fig.193 Plate, *Cleopatra*, Sothebys, 8th June, 1939, 183.



fig.195 Michelangelo, *The Head of Cleopatra*, c1533, Florence, Casa Buonarroti.



fig.194 Follower of Filippino Lippi?, *Cleopatra*, late 15th century, whereabouts unknown.



fig.196 Michelangelo, *Head of Venus*, c1522, Florence, Uffizi.



fig.197 Vasari? after Michelangelo, *Head of Cleopatra*, Private Collection.

This drawing portrays Cleopatra partially dressed, but although she is beautiful, she is not overtly erotic, her message to the viewer is the central element of the image. The drawing recalls Sodoma's early depiction of Lucretia, thought to have been part of a series of illustrious women in which she is an emblem of chastity, as well as many other allegorical personifications from the late *Quattrocento* (fig.155). If the drawing was a preparatory study for a similar series of infamous women, for instance, Piero's painting of Cleopatra as a personification of Luxuria may not have been the only example of an allegorisation of the figure of Cleopatra dating to the end of the fifteenth century.

Michelangelo's Head of Cleopatra.

The argument that Piero's painting is of Cleopatra is strengthened by the fact that Michelangelo may well have had this painting in mind when he produced his drawing of *The Head of Cleopatra* now in the Casa Buonarroti (fig.195).⁹⁵ This drawing is not titled but it has been read as a representation of Cleopatra because a snake winds around the female figure and appears to approach her nipple. The drawing has been dated to around 1533, so it was produced at a time when this iconographic tradition in relation to Cleopatra was firmly established, as will be demonstrated later in the chapter.

Vasari provides further evidence as to the subject matter when he states in his *Life of Properzia de' Rossi* that, along with a painting by that artist, Tommaso Cavalieri gave to Duke Cosimo 'a drawing by the hand of the divine Michelangelo

⁹⁵Hirst, 1988, 56.

... a Cleopatra'.⁹⁶ Aside from the fact that Vasari was intimate with Michelangelo and can be relied upon far more in his case than in Piero di Cosimo's, in this instance Vasari is also backed by a surviving letter of January 1562, sent from Cavalieri to Duke Cosimo.⁹⁷ Evidently he was forced against his will to give up the drawing and likens its loss to the loss of a child; more importantly he also calls it a head of Cleopatra.

A drawing of Cleopatra by the hand of Michelangelo was listed in an inventory of the Medici collections made before Michelangelo died and many of these drawings were given to the Casa Buonarroti in 1617.⁹⁸ Since this is the present location of the drawing in question, it is assumed that this is the drawing of Cleopatra which the various documents refer to, although there is some argument about whether the Casa Buonarroti drawing is the original, there being several other copies in existence, and the quality of the work has been criticised; but it is comparable with other drawings given to Cavalieri in the 1530s.⁹⁹

The drawing of Cleopatra was what has been termed a presentation drawing, in other words it was designed as a present.¹⁰⁰ Michelangelo gave it to his friend Tommaso Cavalieri, and it demonstrates the developments in taste and artistic technique which occurred between the dates of Piero's painting and the later work. Cut off at the arms, the drawing is designed to echo antique busts: Cavalieri was a

⁹⁶'... una carta di mano del divino Michelangelo, dove è una Cleopatre ...', Vasari, *Le Vite*, 1966 ed., 4 405, translation from de Vere, 1996 ed. 1, 860.

⁹⁷Goldscheider, 1966, 54; Hirst, 1988, 116-117.

⁹⁸Goldscheider, 1966, 54; Hirst, 1988, 56, 116-117.

⁹⁹The copies are in the British Museum, the Louvre and Boymans Museum, see Goldscheider, 1966, 54.

¹⁰⁰See Hirst, 1988, 104-118 and Joannides, 1996, 54-55, for Michelangelo's presentation drawings.

connoisseur who owned a large collection of antique sculpture.¹⁰¹ It also demonstrates a trend which started only at the end of the *Quattrocento* for the making of drawings as works of art in their own right, not simply as preparations for larger-scale paintings.¹⁰² Several of Michelangelo's drawings were executed in this spirit and are unusual only in the artist's invention, attention to detail and the concentration which he obviously expended on them. He did not make them for patrons in order to ingratiate himself, however, but only for his very close friends.

Michelangelo's *Head of Cleopatra* may have had a further function in that it could have been given to Cavalieri for him to copy, as Vasari also tells us that Michelangelo gave him several drawings of heads with this purpose in mind.¹⁰³ The serpentine twisting of the neck is characteristic of Michelangelo's figures, echoing for instance the head of the Madonna in the Doni Tondo and the Libyan sibyl on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The complexities of reproducing an anatomically correct depiction of such a pose may well have required a teaching aid.

The drawing can be related to an earlier drawing by Michelangelo dating to 1522 which may provide a link between the later drawing of Cleopatra and Piero di Cosimo's painting. Michelangelo gave several sheets of drawings as gifts to his friend Gherardo Perini, among them, again according to Vasari, a Venus with Mars and Cupid. These also came into the possession of the Medici and a process of deduction has led to the conclusion that a drawing in the Uffizi (formerly the collection of the Medici family) is the drawing in question (fig.196).¹⁰⁴ Venus is the

¹⁰¹Hirst, 1988, 116-117.

¹⁰²Hirst, 1988, 106.

¹⁰³Hirst, 1988, 116.

¹⁰⁴Hirst, 1988, 107, see also Joannides, 1996, 44.

main figure in this work, central and finished to a far greater degree than the sketchy figures of Mars and Cupid which appear in the background, it is likely that she was originally intended to be the only element of the drawing.

What is most relevant in the present context is the combination of the profile pose with exposed breasts, and also the fantastical coiffure. Although in this case the dress of the woman which exposes her breasts is intended to be an *all' antica* style costume, and had precedents in the late *Quattrocento*, the similarities with Piero's painting are notable.¹⁰⁵ As already mentioned, Cleopatra was identified with Venus from an early date and both were associated with Luxuria. If Piero's painting did indeed represent Cleopatra/Luxuria, and if Michelangelo knew the painting, it may have been influential in the execution of this drawing as well as the later Cleopatra.

The snake and breast combination is, however, the common factor in Piero's painting and Michelangelo's drawing of Cleopatra. In both, although to a greater extent in Michelangelo's image, the sinuous and curvilinear designs of the hair and head-dress, which echo the movements of the snake, suggest a link to Medusa, the overtly evil woman of legend, who turned men to stone and whose head was covered by snakes. A later painting based on Michelangelo's drawing, possibly by Vasari, further emphasises this repellent element of Cleopatra by depicting her as a kind of Lamia - vampire/snake/woman (Private Collection, fig.197).¹⁰⁶ So although Michelangelo's woman is evidently attractive to men, inherently she is dangerous.

¹⁰⁵Hirst illustrates a late *Quattrocento* drawing in the British Museum by Marco Zoppo (plate 222), a painter who aspired to classicism, which is also very similar to Michelangelo's drawing of Venus and Piero's painting.

¹⁰⁶Hughes-Hallett, 1990, 150

The seducer of two great Roman leaders could not have appeared evil externally, indeed therein lies her greatest evil, for she must have appeared beautiful, deceptively hiding her hideous true nature. Artistically, in Michelangelo's drawing, this beauty is belied by the appearance of Cleopatra's serpentine hair. The motif of the biting snake also reveals a possible moralistic overtone in the drawing. Michelangelo used this motif on at least two other occasions, both in his *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel. In those instances both victims are sinners in hell, suffering the torments of the damned.

The Continuation of the Breast/Snake Iconography in the Sixteenth Century

However, Michelangelo's drawing is not simply a didactic image in the manner of fifteenth-century depictions of Cleopatra, but represents a new stage of development in the iconography of Cleopatra. The melancholy glance which she casts over her shoulder, her furrowed brow and hooded eyes, add an element of narrative which the fifteenth-century images lack, indicating an interest in the internal drama of Cleopatra's life. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries full-scale paintings focusing solely on Cleopatra became far more popular and, as with images of Lucretia, increasingly erotic. While the earlier images which included the exposure of Cleopatra's breasts cannot be described as deeply erotic, there is no doubt that the close connection between her breasts and her death, which subsequently developed in the iconography of Cleopatra, enhanced the development of the sexualised images. By far the most common episode from Cleopatra's life story to be depicted during this period was the moment before or just after she commits suicide, just as it was with paintings of Lucretia.¹⁰⁷ Stripped of any

¹⁰⁷For a list of paintings of this scene produced from the sixteenth century and

strength or forcefulness, she was increasingly depicted as a victim, broken by her love for and loss of Antony. Often this manifestation of Cleopatra is of a woman, exposed and vulnerable, who has been forced into suicide as a desperate act, not one who has chosen her fate as a fitting end for a noble Queen.

Once into the *Cinquecento*, the meaning implied in depicting a woman dying by a snakebite to the breast shifted subtly as the development of humanistic thinking brought a new attitude to the dangers of love. An alternative aspect of the traditional myth of Cleopatra, which had remained obscure in the early part of the Renaissance, now came to the fore which emphasised Cleopatra as a heroine of love. This rather more ambivalent attitude to the subject of Cleopatra was evident in the literature and art even of the Middle Ages. Although Chaucer wrote his *Legend of Good Women* only twenty or so years after Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* and probably used that text as a source, he is more sympathetic towards Cleopatra, although he was probably being satirical.¹⁰⁸ In the prologue to the text Chaucer claims that he is writing the Legend in order to atone for previously decrying women and thereby sinning against the god of love. Accordingly, in Cleopatra's legend, which is the first he addresses, he emphasises her love for Antony, assuring the reader that 'This noble queene ek lovede so this knyght'.¹⁰⁹

Thus Cleopatra made her appearance as a heroine of chivalric love. In fact, this had already occurred in French literature, in the anonymous *Li Faits des*

through the Baroque see Pigler, 1956, 2, 382-386.

¹⁰⁸Chaucer, 'The Legend of Cleopatra', in *The Complete Works; The Legend of Good Women*, 1957 ed., 496-497.

¹⁰⁹Chaucer, 'The Legend of Cleopatra', in *The Complete Works; The Legend of Good Women*, 1957 ed., line 607.

Romains and Jehan de Tuim's *Li hystorie de Julius Cesar*, both dating to the thirteenth century.¹¹⁰ In these works it is Julius Caesar's love for Cleopatra which is emphasised and this is also true of the thirteenth-century anonymous Italian text *I fatti di Cesare*. This work gives much detail of the beauty of Cleopatra and the finery in which she first appears to Caesar who:

‘... gazed upon her clear brow, broad and level above the eyebrows, which were fine and well turned; her eyes shining and lovely; her nose straight, delicate and well-formed; her mouth small and pouting with the lips crimson and the teeth white and small; her hair chestnut; her shoulders smooth and well-shaped; her breasts full and jutting out on her body ...’¹¹¹

The author follows this description with details of the beauty of the surroundings, the tempting food they had to eat and so on. In this guise, Cleopatra is a fitting heroine for a chivalric tale and it is no wonder that Caesar fell so ardently in love with her.

In examples of manuscript illumination dating to the early Renaissance, Cleopatra is occasionally depicted in this guise as a chivalric heroine, invested with noble queenly demeanour. In a fifteenth-century manuscript version of Plutarch's *Lives*, for instance, now in the British Museum (Add. Ms. 22318), her death is not illustrated. Instead she is depicted in her barge sailing majestically up the Nile to meet Antony who waits, in full knight's armour, on the shore. In a second illumination illustrating the death of Antony, we see Cleopatra and her two maids

¹¹⁰Bullough, 1964, 220.

¹¹¹*I fatti di Cesare*, translated in Bullough, 1964, 342-343.

about to hoist the dying Antony, who has come to this end for love of Cleopatra, into the mausoleum where they are taking refuge. Although these small illuminations illustrate a copy of the Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni's Latin translation of Plutarch, and are reminiscent of the painted panels by Nercoccio de' Landi, they are Gothic in style and have a courtly atmosphere redolent of chivalric romances.¹¹²

It is because of the re-emergence of this marginalised thread of Cleopatra's myth that, despite the generally marked differences in the historical treatments of Cleopatra and Lucretia, artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries found it so easy to transpose these two female victims. Not only do Cleopatra and Lucretia appear in similar settings and circumstances, in various instances two versions of otherwise identical composition differ only in the identity of the woman depicted (figs 198-201).¹¹³ So, although juxtaposed as examples of personifications of virtue and vice in the fifteenth century, the common fact of their suicide, and the association of both their deaths with their breasts, brought them closer together in the sixteenth century.

Further explanation for Cleopatra's enhanced reputation in the *Cinquecento* and the popularity of paintings of her comes, as with Lucretia, from the excavations around Rome at the beginning of that century. These excavations uncovered a second-century BC statue, which is first mentioned in documents of 1512 when it was purchased by Pope Julius II and displayed in the Belvedere in the Vatican

¹¹²For a full discussion of the style of the illuminations in this text see Oakeshott, 1961, 8-17.

¹¹³For instance see the two paintings by Guido Reni: *Lucretia*, Florence, Corsini Gallery, 1635-40 and *Cleopatra*, Florence, Palazzo Pitti, 1638-39, see Pepper, 1984, 283 (figs 198-199). Also two engravings by Jacopo Francia, see Hind, 1938-40, 5, 231-232, 4I, 5II, plate 812-813 (figs 200-201).



fig.198 Guido Reni, *Lucretia*, 1635-40, Florence, Palazzo Pitti.

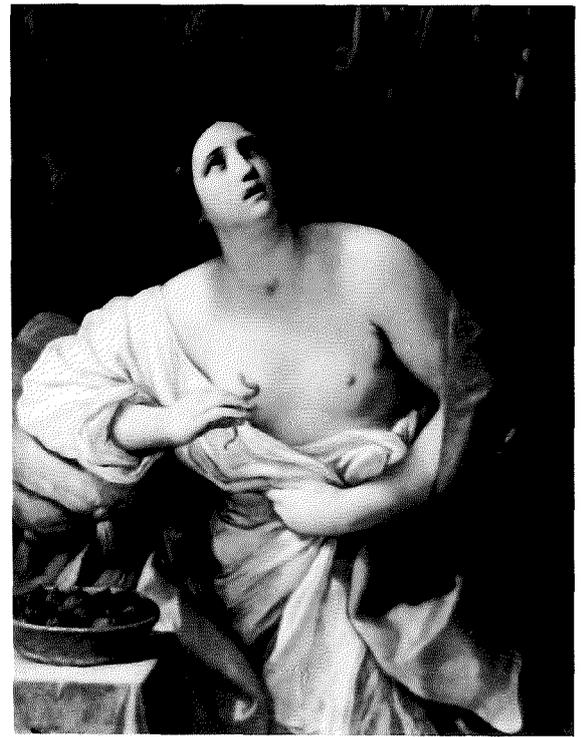


fig.199 Guido Reni, *Cleopatra*, 1638-39, Florence, Corsini Gallery.



fig.200 Jacopo Francia, *Lucretia*, engraving, see Hind, A.M. *Early Italian Engravings: A Critical Catalogue*, London 1938-40, 5, 231, 4I, plate 812.

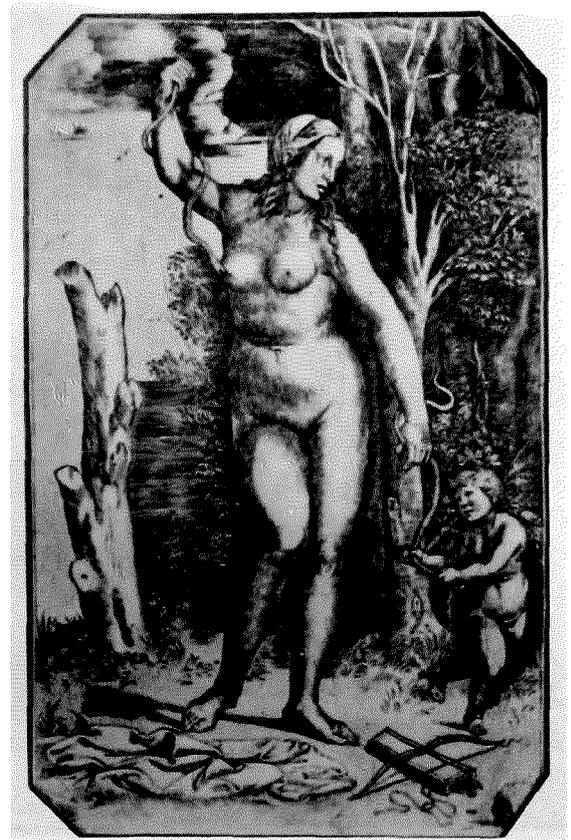


fig.201 Jacopo Francia, *Cleopatra*, engraving, see Hind, A.M. *Early Italian Engravings: A Critical Catalogue*, London 1938-40, 5, 232, 5II, plate 813.

(fig.202).¹¹⁴ The statue was initially identified as Cleopatra, but in the eighteenth century it was reappraised and it is now believed to be a statue of Ariadne. This misidentification was presumably made because of the snake which is wound around the upper part of the sleeping woman's arm. The fact that this brought the snake into close proximity with her exposed breast would have strengthened the misapprehension, as the close association between Cleopatra's breast and the snake had already been established in literature and art.

During the first half of the *Cinquecento* this statue occupied a niche at the end of a corridor in the Belvedere statue court, and was adapted as a fountain. The niche was decorated so that the statue appeared to be situated in a grotto. In the 1550s the statue was moved to a room of its own named the *Stanza della Cleopatra*, which was similarly decorated. Many copies were made and it was evidently highly admired by artists, writers and collectors. Indeed, just as with Lucretia, this classical sculpture appears to have been inspirational to poets, as, over the years, three long poems were carved into the plaster surrounding the figure.

The statue rests in a semi-reclining pose with the right arm raised and resting on the head. The woman bends her head down towards her left shoulder and supports it on her left hand and is presumably sleeping, although it could be supposed that she is dying. The sheer beauty and poignancy of this sculpture, if it is read as the death of a woman, perhaps to some extent explains the interest in Cleopatra as a victim of love rather than an amoral woman in the *Cinquecento*. Her pose is certainly similar to many seen in paintings of *The Death of Cleopatra*

¹¹⁴See Haskell and Penny, 1981, 184-187 for the full history of this sculpture.

produced in the following years and artists who had visited the Vatican were evidently as inspired by it as the poets were.

The figure is well draped and although the uncovered left breast is close to the snake, to Baldassare Castiglione, the author of one of the poems which decorate the border of the sculpture, it was evidently clear that the snake is not biting the breast. His poem starts: 'You who behold this marble, my arms bitten by savage snakes and my eyes dimming into eternal night - do not believe that I slipped unwillingly to my death ...'¹¹⁵

But despite the fact that misidentification of this statue certainly helped to establish this form of iconography for numerous images of Cleopatra's suicide executed in the sixteenth century, many of the artists who based their depictions of Cleopatra on this statue still chose to illustrate the snake biting her on the breast.

The half supported and cross-legged pose is evidently the source for the original work (possibly by Raphael) from which Agostino Veneziano took one of his engravings of Cleopatra (B.XIV.161.198, fig.203).¹¹⁶ In Agostino's engraving the woman is more obviously dying than in the antique statue. Instead of supporting her head the left arm hangs uselessly, while the snake, although it is wound round the upper arm, writhes over and bites her nipple. A distraught Cupid covers his eyes, his bow and arrow, with which he presumably pierced Cleopatra's heart, set on the ground beside him, leaning against an antique altar with a burning fire on top, representing the flames of love and desire. The presence of Cupid aligns Cleopatra

¹¹⁵Baldassare Castiglione 'Cleopatra', in *Selected Latin Poems by Baldassare Castiglione*, 1981, line 1-2.

¹¹⁶Garrard, 1989, 252-253.



fig.202 Hellenistic Statue, *The Sleeping Ariadne*, c240 BC, Rome, Museo Vaticano.



fig.203 Agostino Veneziano, *Cleopatra*, engraving, 16th century, B. XIV.161.198.



fig.204 Battista Dossi, *The Death of Cleopatra*, c1546, whereabouts unknown.



fig.205 Marco Pino, *The Death of Cleopatra*, whereabouts unknown.

once more with the goddess Venus, who is of course Cupid's mother, at whose breast he suckled. Now, however, love has resulted in death and horror, and it is a viper which suckles at her breast.

As noted above, this association with Venus was not new. By the early *Cinquecento* attitudes towards the pleasures of love were changing and becoming more positive and Venus was no longer viewed as the mother of all the vices.¹¹⁷ During the sixteenth century, in the guise of Venus the goddess of love, Cleopatra became a victim of fate. Vulnerable to an external force of nature - love - she could not be held fully responsible for her actions. She thus became a personification of profane as opposed to sacred love, (the two manifestations of Venus) and fell because of her earthly, human desires.¹¹⁸ Love, as a human emotion, can bring great good but can also bring desolation and destruction. In this identification with Venus, Cleopatra is also linked with renaissance personifications of Charity, as discussed in Chapter Two, who represented Christian love and whose breastfeeding became associated with terrestrial or profane love in the sixteenth century.¹¹⁹

The fact that the statue in the Belvedere was adapted as a fountain and placed in grotto-like surroundings suggests that, even before it was reidentified as a sleeping Ariadne, some association between it and sleeping goddess or nymph-type figures had been made.¹²⁰ The classical motif of a sleeping woman set in a landscape, often near a fountain, was well known in the Renaissance and was

¹¹⁷Hall, 1974, 196, see Chapter Two, note 26 on the associations between Charity and Venus, as early as the *Trecento*.

¹¹⁸Panofsky, 1974, 109-138.

¹¹⁹See fig.201 for another example where Cleopatra is coupled with Cupid and thus associated with Venus.

¹²⁰Garrard, 1989, 252-260.

particularly popular in Venice; Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* representing just one of many similar works.¹²¹ The image of a woman so relaxed and at ease with her environment evokes her union with nature, and many different goddesses were depicted in this manner during the Renaissance, generally in varying states of undress. And while these images undoubtedly were viewed with some pleasure by their male patrons, the nudity and perhaps particularly the exposed breasts also denote the female union with the natural and fertile world. The mysterious sleeping female figure, whose body is directed by natural forces in a way a man's body is not, is an enigma to men, she is withdrawn and part of the landscape. Cleopatra could be enveloped in this mystery, perhaps particularly because she represented Egypt, characterised as sensuously female as opposed to the logic and order of the male Roman world.¹²²

As a result of this association with the natural world it became common to depict *The Death of Cleopatra* reclining in a landscape. A typical example of this is a painting produced in the workshop of Battista Dossi, an artist who is associated with the Venetian tradition of the sixteenth century (whereabouts unknown, fig.204).¹²³ This painting is documented as having been delivered to Laura Dianti in 1546 and was part of a series of three landscape paintings which included a *Saint Jerome in a Landscape* and a *Venus with Putti in a Landscape*.

Once more the pose of Cleopatra directly relates to the Belvedere sculpture, but here Cleopatra is still very much awake and alert although a snake already bites at her nipple. Her hair is elegantly arranged and she is well draped with only one

¹²¹Macdougall, 1975, 357-365; Meiss, 1976, 212-239; Garrard, 1989, 253-259.

¹²²Bamber, 1982, 45-70; French, 1982, 30, 128.

¹²³Lucco, 1998, 280-283.

breast exposed. In her left hand she roughly grasps a second snake holding it aloft, while at her feet sits the basket of fruit where presumably the serpents were hidden. In the middle background Octavius and his soldiers gather amid antique ruins - the ruins of Cleopatra's Empire - which stretch into the misty distance. But this Cleopatra appears perfectly calm and reconciled to her fate, surrounded by the beauty of nature, flowers, rocks, trees, she has already escaped the cares of the political world. There is nothing particularly distressing about this painting: with its two companion works it would have provided a pleasing scene, the narrative element provides a point of interest but does not intend to communicate any kind of moralistic message.

The new emphasis in the depiction of Cleopatra as a victim of love was mirrored in Italian literature of the *Cinquecento*, where Cleopatra became the subject of tragic drama. It was during the *Cinquecento* that, in the first instance, Italian authors rediscovered the classical composition of dramatic tragedy.¹²⁴ Versions of Cleopatra's story proliferated across Europe in this form from the late Renaissance through the Baroque.¹²⁵ However, to be the heroine of a tragedy she could not be depicted as a completely bad harlot, she must be noble, if wrongheaded, to engender in audiences an appropriate level of pity and horror at her downfall. G.B. Giraldi Cinthio's play about Cleopatra, written in 1542, is an early example of this. In the prologue Giraldi Cinthio claims that 'Nothing there is gives more joy than fables well presented on the stage' which through pity and horror make us yearn towards virtue by showing 'how those persons meet their end/ Who are not wholly good or bad.'¹²⁶

¹²⁴Bullough, 1964, 222.

¹²⁵For a list of these see Besterman, 1926.

¹²⁶Giraldi Cinthio, *Cleopatra Tragedia*, Venezia, 1583, translated in Bullough,

The emphasis of the play is the greatness of Antony and Cleopatra's love. On the death of Antony, Cleopatra declares 'While you were living, Antony, you were/ My life. Now you my death also shall be ...' and her own dying words are 'See now, Mark Antony/ Your Cleopatra comes to you, no more/ To be divided ever from you.'¹²⁷ In the final scene of the play, Octavius orders that the bodies of Antony and Cleopatra are not separated as their love was both 'immeasurable' and 'perfect'.¹²⁸

Giraldi Cinthio's play was not actually published until later in the century but a *Life of Cleopatra* by Giulio Landi was published in 1551, and again, although modelled on Plutarch, it is far less critical of Cleopatra and Antony.¹²⁹ Cesare de' Cesari's tragic play on the life of Cleopatra was written the following year and once more emphasis is laid on the strength of the love between Antony and Cleopatra, with Cleopatra, prior to committing suicide, beseeching Antony to '... open thy loving arms ... since ... it only now remains/ For me to see thee again, my light.'¹³⁰

Increasingly through the *Cinquecento* and on into the Baroque, the various crimes and sins Cleopatra was alleged to have committed were minimised because

1964, Prologue, 344.

¹²⁷Giraldi Cinthio, *Cleopatra Tragedia*, Venezia, 1583, translated in Bullough, 1964, Act 2, scene 3; Act 5, scene 6.

¹²⁸Giraldi Cinthio, *Cleopatra Tragedia*, Venezia, 1583, translated in Bullough, 1964, Act 5, scene 6.

¹²⁹Bullough, 1964, 224-225.

¹³⁰Cesari de' Cesari, *Cleopatra Tragedia*, 1552, cited in Bullough, 1964, 227. These elements were later mirrored in French versions by Etienne Jodelle and Robert Garnier and English versions by Mary Sidney, Dryden, Samuel Daniel and, of course Shakespeare, see Bullough, 1964, 222-253.

authors chose to portray her as a woman who killed herself for the love of her man. By committing suicide Cleopatra proved that she was true and faithful to Antony, something which was always in doubt with widows when viewed through the suspicious eyes of renaissance men.¹³¹ Although this trend appears to be in Cleopatra's favour, by focusing on her inconsolable grief on the loss of Antony authors stripped her of her power; her political prowess and her determined leadership of Egypt did not interest the writers of the Renaissance. She became a woman who was totally dependent on her man.¹³²

However, despite Cleopatra's rehabilitation in the name of love and tragedy, her complete vindication was never achieved. She was after all a woman and as such had many faults. Thus, on hearing of her suicide, Cinthio's Octavius declares:

'How true the saying, that a woman is
The breeding-place of lying and the nest
of all deceits! ...'¹³³

Cleopatra continued to be characterised in literature as fickle, with a tendency to greed, deceit and sexual incontinence. Shakespeare is generally thought to have written the subtlest version of the story of Antony and Cleopatra, but in the very first scene of the play he stresses how Antony's military prowess has been

¹³¹Kelso, 1956, 121-135; King, 1991, 56-62.

¹³²French, 1982, 30, 128.

¹³³Giraldi Cinthio, *Cleopatra Tragedia*, Venezia, 1583, translated in Bullough, 1964, Act 5, scene 6.

undermined by his love for Cleopatra: the ‘triple pillar of the world [is] transformed/ Into a strumpet’s fool’.¹³⁴

This continuing strand of the myth of Cleopatra, in which she was viewed in a less positive light, also manifested itself in artistic images of the *Cinquecento*, where the sexual aspects of her character were played upon. Again the breast iconography facilitated this. Perhaps because Cleopatra was characterised as a sexual libertine, who willingly gave her body to men, it may have appeared particularly acceptable in her case to show off her body to audiences, and even more blatant sexual images of her were produced. Marco Pino’s reclining *Cleopatra*, (location unknown) combines a twisting pose with Mannerist exaggeration to produce an overtly sexual image (fig.205).¹³⁵ Completely nude, with her arms stretched above her head and her legs open, this woman blatantly offers herself to the viewer. It is unlikely that Lucretia would ever have been depicted in such a sexually aggressive posture.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Shakespeare, ‘Antony and Cleopatra’, Act 1, scene 1, lines 13-14.

¹³⁵ Borca, 1962, 24-52; Voss, 1997, 116-119.

¹³⁶ The trend for depicting Cleopatra in a reclining pose continued into the seventeenth century. Guercino, Artemisia Gentileschi and Sebastiano Mazzoni, among many others, all produced at least one painting of *The Death of Cleopatra* in varying states of collapse (figs 206-208). For Guercino see Mahon, 1968, no. 48. 144; McCorquodale, 1976, 205-206; for Artemisia see Garrard, 1989, 244-277, and for Sebastiano Mazzoni see Waterhouse, 1962, 129. Guercino’s *Cleopatra*, now in the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa, is revealed to us from behind heavy velvet curtains as if it were the final scene in a tragedy. She lies on a chaise-longue amid white drapery, apparently slipping into death, one arm hangs by her side, although the other still holds the snake to her breast. Her noble head is turned to the audience, her face and body relaxed. The image is both poignant and unthreatening, the sensuous flesh can be appreciated without fear. As Millard Meiss has pointed out, the popularity of painting woman sleeping, from the sixteenth century, was partly due to the fact that if the object of a male gaze is asleep, the viewer can take his time in appreciating her beauty without self-reproach, or the threat of being ‘caught in the act’ by the female in question. This is even more true of a dead woman, see Meiss, 1976, 225. And as

But the reclining pose was not the only manner in which Cleopatra was portrayed in the later Renaissance and early Baroque. In many cases she appears in a more upright sitting position or standing. Baccio Bandinelli drew several reclining studies of Cleopatra dating to the period 1512-1515, suggesting that he had been inspired by the Belvedere statue.¹³⁷ His bronze sculpture, now in the Museo Nazionale, Florence, is however, erect not reclining. This completely nude figure raises one arm over her head, which may refer to the antique sculpture, and grasps the snake in the other hand (fig.209).

If one compares the bronze by Bandinelli to an engraving of Cleopatra by Agostino Veneziano (B.XIV.158.193, fig.210), dating to 1515, it is clear that the upper torsos of both female figures are very similar and so Bandinelli may well have influenced Agostino.¹³⁸ But the position of the legs and feet are not similar and a

Meiss also points out, sleep and death were continually aligned, and referred to as brothers, in poetry from the Classical period through to the Renaissance, see Meiss, 1976, 227. Sebastiano Mazzoni's painting of the *Death of Cleopatra*, now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, is an exaggeration of these elements. Because the field of this painting is vertical and Cleopatra's virtually nude body is pushed to the foreground, it is almost as if she is laid out purely for the viewer to leer at. Her head is in shadow and appears relatively unimportant although the mouth hangs open in a manner that is both grotesque and inviting. The snake is wrapped around her hand and lies on her exposed torso while writhing towards the breast. The light highlights the lower part of her body which she is powerless to protect from violation, thus the snake - whose fangs are about to penetrate her flesh - can be interpreted as a phallic symbol, see Garrard, 1989, 247. One feels that the narrative element in the upper right corner, where a waiting-woman holds Cleopatra's crown, has been added merely to balance out the weight of Cleopatra's body at the front of the painting.¹³⁷Ward, 1988, 47.

¹³⁸It has been suggested that this engraving is based on one of the studies for Bandinelli's bronze, see Ward, 1988, 47. However, the drawing in question, now in the British Museum, London, is not of Cleopatra and probably dates to the 1520s (fig.211). It has been argued that this figure holds a snake in her right hand, but it

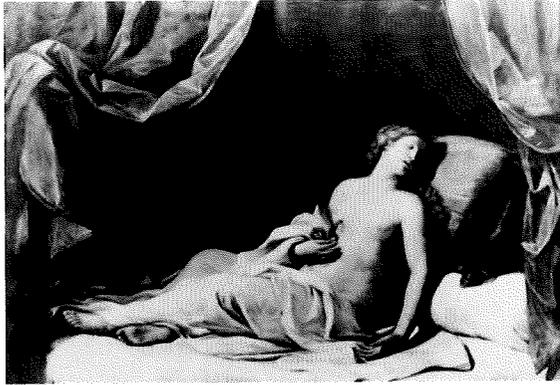


fig.206 Guercino, *The Death of Cleopatra*, c1648, Genoa, Galleria di Palazzo Rosso.



fig.207 Artemisia Gentileschi, *The Death of Cleopatra*, 1621, Milan, Amedeo Morandotti.



fig.208 Sebastiano Mazzoni, *The Death of Cleopatra*, 17th century, Munich, Alte Pinakothek.



fig.209 Baccio Bandinelli, *Cleopatra*, 16th century, Florence, Museo Nazionale di Bargello.



fig.210 Agostino Veneziano, after Baccio Bandinelli, *Cleopatra*, engraving, 1515, B.XIV.158.193.



fig.211 Baccio Bandinelli, study, *Cleopatra?* 1520s, London, British Museum.

likely source for the lower part of Agostino's figure is Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving, after Raphael, of Lucretia (fig.151).¹³⁹ The same stepping-forward movement which is seen in the Marcantonio image is used here, the right foot raised on a plinth. In the Lucretia image this device emphasises Lucretia's firm decision in stepping towards her fate. But Agostino's Cleopatra does not raise her hands to steady her action and instead leans on a rather unsupportive-looking tall jug. As a result she appears more unbalanced and out of control than Marcantonio's Lucretia. This is partly due to the mannerist treatment of the stance, but also, perhaps, it can be explained by the fact that Cleopatra did not really qualify as an icon of pathos (as defined by David Rosand in the previous chapter) in the early sixteenth century. She remained tainted by the fact that she had died because she gave in to her passionate nature. She experienced deep distress and this is evident in her face, but she was not an innocent.¹⁴⁰

The drawing by Giacomo Francia, in the Art Museum in Princeton, of Cleopatra struggling with the asp, in an apparently distressed state, has even less gravitas than the Agostino engraving (fig.212).¹⁴¹ It has been argued that the aim of Francia here is to suggest that there is a sexual aspect to the struggle, as if Cleopatra

appears more likely to be a thick tress of her hair and the plate she holds in her left hand does not relate to any element of Cleopatra's narrative.

¹³⁹Stechow, 1960, 75.

¹⁴⁰If, for instance, the two engravings by Jacopo Francia (the first of Cleopatra and the second of Lucretia, figs 200-201) are compared, it may be observed that, despite the fact that the figures of both women are almost exactly the same, Lucretia has been given a far more noble and classicised setting. To some extent her nudity is shielded by the drapery which is wrapped around her and her background is classical architecture. Cleopatra, on the other hand, is accompanied by Cupid to identify her with earthly love and nothing higher, and she is set in the wild landscape which echoes her nature.

¹⁴¹Roio, 1986, 29-57.

were fighting off an unwanted lover.¹⁴² Sitting naked on a disordered bed, she holds the snake away from her with one hand while raising the other hand as if to ward off the bite and twists her head away. This scene is reminiscent of many of the images of the rape of Lucretia. Despite the fact that Cleopatra, according to the sources, was desperate to commit suicide and thereby avoid being in the power of Octavius, in this case the artist has chosen to suggest that Cleopatra was an involuntary victim of the snake and his Cleopatra is designed to titillate male viewers with her helplessness and naked vulnerability. She contrasts sharply with Marco Pino's reclining Cleopatra, who appears to be offering herself sexually, but in neither case do we see any sign of a powerful woman independently pursuing her own fate against the wishes of a male authority.

The Breast and Death: Cleopatra as Eve, Isis and Others.

In images dating to the sixteenth century where the snake is shown actually biting Cleopatra, it is almost always the nipple the snake is attached to. This detail dates back at least to the French manuscript image of 1480. Considering how close such a specific detail is to the suckling motif it seems likely that it has some significance and links Cleopatra to figures associated with the suckling motif. As noted at the end of Chapter Three, the legend of the Christian virgin martyr, St. Christine of Bolsena, in the *Golden Legend* relates how snakes would only 'cling to the breasts' of a virtuous woman without harming her; this was clearly not the case with Cleopatra.¹⁴³ But another woman who was depicted suckling as a signifier of

¹⁴²Hughes-Hallett, 1990, 152.

¹⁴³Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 1993 ed., 1, 387.



fig.212 Giacomo Francia, *Cleopatra*, Princeton, Art Museum.



fig.213 Jean Cousin, *Eva Prima Pandora*, c1549, Paris, Louvre.



fig.214 Barthel Betham, *Cleopatra*, 16th century, engraving, published in Russell, H.D. *Eva/Ave Women in Renaissance and Baroque Prints*, Washington and New York 1990.



fig.215 Barbieri, *Cleopatra*, engraving, see Hind, A.M. *Early Italian Engravings: A Critical Catalogue*, London 1938-40, 5, 157; 27, plate 714.

her original sin and punishment, and who was also associated with the serpent, was Eve.

In his article on the painting *Eva Prima Pandora*, by the northern artist Jean Cousin (Paris, Louvre), Jean Guillaume argues convincingly that hidden in this work are indications that the artist intended the female depicted to represent not only Eve and Pandora but also Cleopatra (fig.213).¹⁴⁴ This is backed up by the fact that not one but two snakes are included in the iconography of the work. The first, which refers to Eve, is almost hidden in the dark left-hand corner of the scene.¹⁴⁵ The second snake is wound round the woman's arm, a detail which traditionally represented Cleopatra rather than Eve. Furthermore, as the author points out, the natural setting of many sixteenth century engravings and paintings of Cleopatra links with the iconography traditionally used in paintings of Eve.¹⁴⁶

Consider, for instance, a sixteenth century engraving by Barthel Betham which shows Cleopatra naked, standing in a landscape by a tree and holding a snake (fig.214).¹⁴⁷ The iconographic combination of the tree and the snake clearly refers to contemporary depictions of Eve. Indeed, if Cleopatra's name had not been included in the background a viewer might well think that this was Eve.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴Guillaume, 1972, 185-194.

¹⁴⁵Guillaume, 1972, 186-187.

¹⁴⁶Guillaume, 1972, 188.

¹⁴⁷Russell, 1990, 47. This print was possibly copied at some point by Agostino Veneziano, as the copy I use has his initials included, a detail not found in the illustration in Russell's book.

¹⁴⁸For similar, upright Cleopatras in exterior settings see the aforementioned engraving by Jacopo Francia and an engraving by Barbari, Hind, 1938-40, 5, 157; 27, pl.714, fig.215)

Aside from the fact that both Eve and Cleopatra were closely associated throughout history with serpents, it is in fact hardly surprising that Eve, the archetypal Christian embodiment of women's wickedness, could become associated with Cleopatra, the seductress who manipulated and caused the ruin of both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony and thereby threatened the Roman Empire. Eve, of course, is viewed by Christian posterity as the original and wicked "Mary". And Mary was very much associated with the suckling motif, even in the sixteenth century.

Perhaps the implication of a wicked woman, such as Cleopatra, being depicted dying by a snakebite to the nipple is that instead of giving forth life-giving nourishment from her breasts, she receives her fitting punishment in the form of poison taken in via the nipple and thus the poison is going directly to her heart, as the breast is the route to the heart. Again, Cleopatra is nursing her death, or even nursing human evil as Mary nursed good. Thus although the overt moral overtones of early images of Cleopatra have disappeared in the depictions dating to the sixteenth century, she still represents a morally ambivalent figure.¹⁴⁹

During the sixteenth century the Florentine writer Petrus Victorius pointed out that artists were not adhering to the classical sources when they depicted Cleopatra 'applying the asp to her paps'; but there was some genuine historical ambiguity about the manner of Cleopatra's death, as we have seen.¹⁵⁰ Even Plutarch, after telling the story of the asp biting Cleopatra's arm, goes on to say: '...

¹⁴⁹In ancient times the snake represented the earth and the motif of a woman suckling serpents denoted Earth Mother or Tellus Mater, and it was this imagery which was adapted in the Middle Ages for personifications of Luxuria, see Hall, 1974, 196. Again it is clear how breast imagery encompasses a very wide range of meaning and implication.

¹⁵⁰Cited in Sbordone, 1930, 3-22, 17.

the real truth nobody knows, for there is another story that she carried poison about with her in a hollow comb ... indeed the asp was never discovered,' adding,

‘Some people also say that two faint, barely visible punctures were found on Cleopatra’s arm, and Octavius Caesar himself seems to have believed this, for when he celebrated his triumph he had a figure of Cleopatra with the asp clinging to her carried in the procession.’¹⁵¹

In the wake of the text *I fatti di Cesare* and Boccaccio’s *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, mediaeval and renaissance writers often created completely different versions of the suicide. Chaucer described Cleopatra jumping naked into a pit of snakes; Cinthio had her imbibing poison from a phial; while others describe her dying of grief over Antony’s body.¹⁵² However, artists of the sixteenth century, in the vast majority of cases, chose to illustrate Cleopatra’s death combining snake with exposed breasts. As with Lucretia, Cleopatra’s death had visually become symbolically associated with the idea of a wound to her breasts.

As this chapter has shown, this association between Cleopatra’s breasts and her death is partially explained by her links with the vice Luxuria, Venus, Eve, Lucretia and even Mary, but there were also ancient connotations attached to Cleopatra which further explain the phenomenon. Because Cleopatra was Queen of Egypt she was considered to be immortal, the living representation of Isis, and

¹⁵¹Plutarch, ‘The Life of Marc Antony’, in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 86.

¹⁵²Chaucer, ‘The Legend of Cleopatra’, in *The Complete Works; The Legend of Good Women*, 1957 ed., line 694-697; Giraldi Cinthio, *Cleopatra Tragedia*, Venezia, 1583, translated in Bullough, 1964, Act 5, scene 6; Hughes-Hallett, 1990, 122-123.

during her reign she used this as propaganda to strengthen her rule, deliberately styling herself as the ancient goddess. Her choice of death may have been symbolically referring to this, assuming she died by the bite of a snake. In many ancient statues depicting Isis, the goddess is shown with a snake wound round each wrist, and Cleopatra also had herself depicted in this manner. If indeed Cleopatra did die by snakebite, her method of suicide may have been expressing her belief that in death she would be united with the immortal spirit of Isis.

Even if Cleopatra did not die by snakebite, this identity with Isis may explain the historical belief that she did. The cobra was a particular symbol of the royal house of Egypt, identifying the Queen with the Egyptian goddess Isis.¹⁵³ For the event of her death, as Plutarch states, Cleopatra was dressed in her royal robes. This outfit could have included two bracelets, signifying her identity with Isis, wrought in the shape of snakes wound round her wrists.

Although the subtleties of Egyptian pagan cults may not have been known to artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they would have been aware of the connection between Isis and Cleopatra, as most of the ancient texts mention that Cleopatra dressed herself as the ancient goddess. Plutarch states, for instance, that on public occasions Cleopatra ‘wore the robe which is sacred to Isis, and she was addressed as the New Isis’.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³For information on Isis and Cleopatra as Isis see Witt, 1971, 34; Garrard, 1989, 266-268; Hughes-Hallett, 1990, 82-84; Brenk, 1992, 159-182.

¹⁵⁴Plutarch, ‘The Life of Marc Antony’, in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 54.

This link with Isis may also partially explain the later confusion between a bite to the arm and a bite to the breast. In Egypt Cleopatra was not just Queen: to her people, she embodied Egypt; and traditionally the monarchy descended through the female line. Men became Pharaoh only by association with the eldest surviving daughter of the Queen. If the daughter was unmarried at the time of her father's death then she could be married to her brother who would then become Pharaoh. If she was married or married after the death of her father then her husband became Pharaoh.¹⁵⁵ Cleopatra was married at various times to two of her brothers but the ceremonies were conducted only so that the brothers could govern. Cleopatra conferred divinity on her brothers.¹⁵⁶

This relates directly to the cult of Isis. Isis was a goddess of fertility and by the act of breastfeeding her son Horus, she conferred his divinity on him: she was depicted in the act of breastfeeding in numerous ancient statues and paintings. Thus the breast, a symbol of fertility, was another important emblem of the goddess. Cleopatra also copied this type of imagery. Her son by Julius Caesar, named Caesarion, was born on a feast day of Isis and subsequently Cleopatra ordered coins to be cast with an image of her in the guise of Isis nursing Caesarion in the guise of Horus.¹⁵⁷ Evidently, this connection between Isis, Cleopatra and breastfeeding was

¹⁵⁵Luomala, 1982, 19-31; Garrard, 1982, 19-31.

¹⁵⁶Luomala, 1982, 19-31.

¹⁵⁷Lindsey, 1971, 59. Lindsey also points out that in late Pharaonic times the Pharaoh, as Amun's son, had his divine birth represented in detail as a ritual-drama on temple walls. Amun is shown as the King visiting the Queen, (Pharaoh's parents) and after the birth of the child he is brought to the god who takes him into his arms and greets him as Horus. The Child is then suckled by a cowheaded Hathor, Isis or a cow. Breastfeeding was evidently a central element of the ancient religions. The idea of breastmilk conferring divinity is a common one in many religions and was certainly abroad in the Renaissance. See for example the famous image by Tintoretto depicting the myth, *The Creation of the Milky Way*, which tells the story

well known by the time Shakespeare wrote *Antony and Cleopatra*, as he uses nursing imagery throughout his play to identify Cleopatra with Isis.¹⁵⁸ ‘Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,/ That sucks the nurse asleep?’ Cleopatra demands of her waiting woman in the final scene of the play.¹⁵⁹ Over the centuries the two iconographical signifiers, the snake and the breast, may have become conflated in the image of the Death of Cleopatra.

Conclusion.

Of course the sensual depictions of Cleopatra’s body produced in the sixteenth century and after have led various modern writers to dwell on the voyeuristic element in the paintings. In her book *Cleopatra*, Lucy Hughes-Hallett claims that artists who chose to depict Cleopatra holding the snake to her breasts further sexualised the images, so that they became pornographic and even covertly blasphemous, in the sense that they were antiMadonna-and-child images.¹⁶⁰ But, while it may be true that these paintings are designed to give aesthetic pleasure to (male) viewers, interpreting the images of Cleopatra with exposed breasts in a purely sexual light is not entirely valid.

of how, when the goddess Hera was sleeping, Hercules was put to her breast in order to make him immortal.

¹⁵⁸Lloyd, 1959, 88-94; Bono, 1984; Garrard, 1989, 271.

¹⁵⁹Shakespeare, ‘Antony and Cleopatra’, Act 5, scene 2, line 314-315.

¹⁶⁰Hughes-Hallett, 1990, 152.

Although the discussion above may explain, to some extent, the coincidence that Cleopatra and Lucretia were both repeatedly shown dying by a wound to the breast despite what the historical sources may or may not have stated, it does not explain it fully. According to Plutarch, Cleopatra beat and tore at her breasts when Antony died and these wounds subsequently became infected.¹⁶¹ Yet nowhere in any of the paintings of Cleopatra produced in the Renaissance and Baroque is there any sign of scars, despite the tragic or even sadistic element they might add to paintings. Of course, details of that nature would not be aesthetically pleasing, but the depiction of such wounds would furthermore detract from the wider message the artists were aiming at when portraying Cleopatra with her breasts uncovered. In effect, it did not matter how the real Cleopatra had died historically. Because of the association between a woman's heart and her breast and the wide-ranging significance of the female breast, iconographically the artist could and can convey a greater depth and subtlety of meaning by depicting the death of a woman occurring by a blow or a bite to the breast than he can by depicting her suffering a snakebite to the arm, or for that matter, a dagger-blow to the stomach.¹⁶²

Certainly, the image of Cleopatra holding the snake to her breast links to *Maria lactans* paintings, but it is in no way blasphemous. Instead it simply emphasises the fact that the breast is a signifier of women, it encompasses references not only to Mary but also to Isis on whom Cleopatra modelled herself, to Venus and

¹⁶¹Plutarch, 'The Life of Marc Antony', in *Makers of Rome; Nine Lives by Plutarch*, 1965, 9, 82.

¹⁶²This is also true, to a certain extent, for writers, as was demonstrated by the anonymous author of *I fatti di Cesare* when he wrote specifically that Cleopatra 'placed [the snake] to her left breast near her heart', from the translation in Bullough, 1964, 343.

to many other female figures.¹⁶³ The breast has a universal meaning understood throughout time and across cultures. To reiterate the argument given in Chapter Four, if you strike at the breast of a woman you strike at her heart, her essence. In a way Cleopatra represents a bridge between powerful women such as herself and the ultimate Christian mother, Mary, and saintly victims such as Agatha and Lucretia, and all are associated with breast imagery. The breast, as a symbol of love and sex, love and motherhood and of death, is intimately bound with all essential elements of the lives of women as they were visualised in renaissance art.

¹⁶³ It has even been suggested by Mary Hamer that we view Cleopatra as a mother-figure because her death triggered the birth of what we consider to be our history, see Hamer, 1993,. introduction, xvii.

Conclusion

This thesis has tried to look at breast iconography over a much broader spectrum than the narrow iconographical studies or isolating categorisation of the past, and has found that the opposing maternal and sexual aspects of the female breast, which can cause tumultuous emotions and ambiguous responses, can be paradoxically complementary. The breast has been used in art of all ages and certainly in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, as a reflection of the all-embracing, complex nature of women and the myriad combinations of good and bad inherent in them all. Women, as represented by breast iconography, were not simple, one-dimensional beings and mediaeval and renaissance viewers of all types would have appreciated this. This must be borne in mind when attempting analysis of any individual form of breast iconography.

I do not deny the weight of research produced over the last few decades which has found that art has tended to objectify, idealise or demonise women. I have tried to look at a certain selection of images of woman from a slightly different angle, that is through the filter of breast iconography, and have found evidence of highly nuanced meanings attached to the female breast which are not essentially negative in character. The breast, as it appears in art of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, defies categorisation and fits in comfortably in most situations depicted, yet its significance is always subtle, extenuated and many-faceted. Its meanings can be appreciated instinctively as well as rationally. The diversity of meaning applied to the breast and the width of associations attached to it are not applicable to any other part of the human body. The female breast is both vitally powerful in its regenerative ability to nourish infants, but it is also exposed and vulnerable: since human females have walked upright on two legs it has been positioned unprotected by bone or cartilage, protruding on the upper torso. It therefore is a perfect symbol both of the strength and weakness of women.

The singular nature of breast iconography is inextricably linked to the breasts' ability to lactate, to produce food as if from nothing. In a time when starvation was a constant threat and terror, this miraculous gift was so valued that even in images where the breast was not lactating, the ambiguous inherent sexuality signified by breasts could be overridden by the link to their nourishing maternal aspect.

The shared meanings which link different types of breast iconography result in difficulty in identifying images of women where there is overt breast symbolism but no other identifying signals. Indeed artists may have deliberately blurred the lines of definite identification. This thesis has tried to demonstrate how images of the breast were not primarily sexual in content and attitudes to it were generally positive because it represented love and duty, from the individual level of mothers to the elevated level of governments, countries and even Christ and God. Even when sexuality was a prominent element of meaning in an image including exposed breasts, they still remained a multi-purpose symbol, retaining their associations with maternity and security and love. This demonstrates how effective the breast was in communicating wide-ranging and often paradoxical concepts.

The aim of this study has not been to provide a comprehensive catalogue of different types of breast iconography but to examine patterns of meaning and the ubiquity of the iconography. There are no real conclusions to be reached at the end of a dissertation of this nature. I have attempted to show that definitive interpretations of breast iconography, whatever form it takes, are misleading, but that all types, no matter how diverse, are linked by basic connotations.

I have tried to highlight how the female breast can be used as a visual (as well as literary) symbol for the heart or even soul of a women. This concept was described explicitly in the description of Gertrude of Helfta's vision of the pregnant Virgin

Mary: the Virgin's transparent womb allowed the mystic to witness Christ '... nurse avidly in delight at the heart of His Virgin Mother.'¹ In a visual image the breast stands in for the internal organ which is the source of love, and produces milk, the physical embodiment of love.

There are many further roads that could be followed, and, when doing final editing, I was struck by just how much I had had to leave out. The five women focused on in this study fit neatly into the time-frame of the work, starting with chaste *Maria lactans* at the height of her popularity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and ending with sexualised Cleopatra who did not become popular subject matter in art until the sixteenth century. But many other time-frames could have been isolated and many other women would have been equally valid subjects of research related to breast imagery. Ancient women and pagan figures such as Dido and Virginia, not to mention the many-breasted goddess Diana of Epheus, could have been included, as could further investigation of the implications of the Amazon legend. Many, many female saints who died by a sword wound to the breast and many, many females associated with breastfeeding iconography both in the pagan past and during the Christian period - perhaps particularly Eve, who brought down the curse of childbirth and lactation on human women - are relevant to the study. Mary Magdalen, who represents both sinner and penitent, sexuality and chastity and who was visualised both as a ravaged ascetic and a plump and bare-breasted beauty during the course of the Renaissance, would also be relevant to the themes of this thesis.

Geographic patterns of popularity of different types of breast iconography is a further area of research yet to be fully investigated. There also appear to be deeply ramified associations between pearls, jewels, chastity, luxury and the female breast, which warrants further investigation.

¹Cited in Bynum, 1991, 198.

Indeed, investigation of the female breast as it appears in art could be broadened out indefinitely, because in every culture breastfeeding and breasts are uniquely important and so deeply embedded within individual and collective psychological make-up that interpretation and analysis are well-nigh unlimited. Although it is true to say that images of breasts are certainly not simply about sex in any context, it is impossible to categorise everything that they are about.

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