REVELATIONS OF THE FLESH AND TESTIMONIES OF DESIRE:
SEBASTIANO DEL PIOMBO'S MARTYRDOM OF SAINT AGATHA

by

SANDRA SEEKINS

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1991

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of Fine Arts)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
September 30, 1995
© Sandra Lynn Seekins, 1995
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of **FINE ARTS**

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada  

Date **September 30, 1995**.
ABSTRACT

In 1520 Sebastiano del Piombo completed the painting the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha for his patron Cardinal Ercole Rangone. Scholarly discussions of this image indicate that struggles to describe it are caught up in an imposed artificial division between the erotic and the sacred. However, as my analysis of the painting will make clear, there is no stable separation between the secular and the sacred in visual imagery of the sixteenth century. In the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha, erotic and spiritual interests cannot be separated, but are codependent within the multivalent possibilities articulated.

My argument derives from the image itself, and in particular from an analysis of the artistic traditions employed and early sixteenth-century attitudes toward the body and erotic tropes. Two established visual modes are conflated in the painting: the tradition of the Venetian nude and the tradition of the monumental muscular female figure associated with Michelangelo. The salvific resonance of Christ's body, related to all saints' bodies, is also an important aspect of the painting. In the case of a female saint, a conflict is played out between the idea that holy women have "become male," and practices from female piety in which women associate their own corporeality with Christ's suffering flesh.

The gender ambiguity of Saint Agatha - the result of the blurring of visual traditions, her connection to the body of Christ, and the "becoming male" theory, is also related to ideas about androgyny and hermaphroditism. Sebastiano del Piombo's Martyrdom of Saint Agatha problematizes gender, erotic, sacred, passive, and active categories. In the Renaissance, it offered a complex type of viewing pleasure, and its viewers participated in the formation of its potential meanings.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................... ii

TABLE OF CONTENTS..................................................................................... iii

LIST OF FIGURES............................................................................................... iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS....................................................................................... viii

INTRODUCTION................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER ONE..................................................................................................... 8
Problems in the Literature

CHAPTER TWO................................................................................................... 20
Production and Patronage

CHAPTER THREE............................................................................................... 29
Venetian and Tuscan Traditions
Bodily Topographies and Constructs of Viewing:

CHAPTER FOUR................................................................................................. 48
Incarnational Theology

CHAPTER FIVE................................................................................................... 61
Becoming Male

CHAPTER SIX..................................................................................................... 72
Disruptive Bodies:
The Androgyne and the Hermaphrodite

CONCLUSION..................................................................................................... 82

BIBLIOGRAPHY................................................................................................. 87

FIGURES............................................................................................................ 98
LIST OF FIGURES

Source: Volpe, L'Opera completa di Sebastiano del Piombo, fig. 51.

Source: Turner, The Vision of Landscape in Renaissance Italy, fig. 50.


4. Sebastiano del Piombo, The Death of Adonis. 189 x 285 cm.
Florence: Uffizi, 1513.
Source: Volpe, fig. 25.

5. Woodcut from the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili. 1499.
Source: Turner, fig. 51.

Source: Volpe, fig. 13 (detail).


Source: Hirst, Sebastiano del Piombo, fig. 76.

Source: Hirst, fig. 80.

Source: Hirst, fig. 107.


   Source: Wilde, fig. 150.


18. Cosimo Tura, *Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels*. 1474.
   Source: Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ* fig. 226.

   Source: Steinberg, fig. 101.


   Source: Steinberg, fig. 95.
Source: *I Giganti della Pittura Sebastiano del Piombo*, fig. 7.

Source: Bynum, fig. 7.6.

Source: Bynum, fig. 7.7.

Source: Bynum, fig. 3.14.


Encouragement and support are vital to any academic project, so I feel particularly fortunate to have had advisors at the University of British Columbia who, in addition to those ingredients, offered astute criticism and suggestions: Dr. Rose Marie San Juan and Dr. Debra Pincus. I also owe a debt of gratitude to colleagues at other institutions, particularly Josephine Jungic at Capilano College, responsible for stimulating my initial interest in art history, and Dr. Pia Cuneo of the University of Arizona, for her continuing correspondence and friendship. Many graduate students were generous with conversation and acts of kindness; I especially thank Bronwen Wilson, for going out of her way in Italy and for her hospitality in Chicago, and Sharla Sava, for her input during bouts of academic turbulence and for many stimulating discussions.

The constant rejuvenation of my patience and strength is owing to Lori MacIntosh, whose practical ability to see past the chaos of any dilemma to a solution beyond has resulted in the ascension of many intellectual obstacles.

My parents steadfastly supported me as I frequently altered my course. I dedicate this work to my mother and to the memory of my father, whose death profoundly taught me to seek a balance in the dispersal of my energy.
Introduction

... to follow Foucault à la lettre, the Renaissance comes before the regimes of sexuality, and to speak of sexuality in the period at all is a misnomer. This is indeed the case if sexuality is taken as a marker of identity, definitional of a core of the person... Yet this does not mean that the anachronism of speaking of sexuality in the Renaissance is not to be risked, especially if the failure to invoke sexuality means acting as if texts of the period can always be explained in other terms, and in ways in which anything like sex disappears...sexuality is only phantasmatically cordoned off to some private sphere; in truth, sexuality structures and destructures the social.

-Jonathan Goldberg

Discussions of the gendered body and its representation must always be acknowledged as shifting, as lacking secure boundaries. It is precisely by examining these unstable boundaries that we can begin to understand how the body in representation works in the formation and exercise of authority.

-Marcia Pointon

The following study is predominantly concerned with a panel painting representing the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha and executed in Rome in 1520 by Sebastiano del Piombo (fig. 1). What does it mean for me, from my postmodern vantage point, to take as my object of study an early sixteenth-century painting of a third-century female martyr? Recent feminist studies and gay and lesbian studies have focused both on the ways in

3The painting's measurements are 131 cm by 175 cm. There is some dispute regarding its date. Although the painting itself was dated 1520 by the artist, there exists a letter from Sebastiano to Michelangelo dated 1519 which refers to the bill for this painting, suggesting it was already finished at that time. See: Michael Hirst, Sebastiano del Piombo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) 76.
which personal interests are interwoven with institutional ones, and on how relationships of power are played out across the minutest of ideological and spatial territories. In light of this, it is crucial that scholars specify what they have at stake in their objects of study, issues which concern them as they construct histories for those objects.

In the theoretical and psychological aftermath of the demise of the Cartesian subject, it is critical to focus on the role of representation in shaping our partial and provisional realities; to investigate the complex interlinks between the body, sexuality, and subjectivity; to examine how certain identities are acquired through, formed by, incorporated into, or excluded from, dominant social constructions of meaning. Struggles over meaning often occur on the battlefield that is the body, especially those struggles that register the violence of sexual difference as the most fundamental aspect of identity formation. In this late twentieth-century age, this most recent millenarian moment, we are witnessing the devastation of AIDS, the spreading use of the "personality pill" Prozac, and the debates (on ethics, economics, and censorship) surrounding Virtual Reality and the disembodied world of the Internet. We are continually reminded of both our distance from, and our proximity to, our own bodily experience. It is a bodily experience that is never unmediated, one that we are constantly physically aware of, but from which we are perpetually psychically estranged.


As an art historian trained in interdisciplinary methodologies, my particular concerns surround historical formulations of sexual difference in representation, and the social mechanisms which create and perpetuate gender inequality. This is what concerns me now, and this is what intrigues me about representations of bodies in the past: how are ideas about sex, sexuality, gender and the body shaped within historical circumstances? Moreover, whose interests are served and whose denied by particular representations?6 And, perhaps most importantly, how do these representations engage viewers, and what are the implications of a possible range of meanings?

Religious beliefs about sexuality and materiality, classical beliefs about sexuality and the human body - that are part of the humanist revival of antiquity - and lived codes of behavior for men and women are not separate discrete systems of knowledge and activity. They overlap and are contingent in complicated and antagonistic ways. Sebastiano's painting points to the problems encountered when an artist works within a patronage circle inflected by such a meshing of cultural codes. It calls up the tensions that exist when a female saint, who is chaste, is placed in a situation of impending violence that has an erotic dimension. Historically, Saint Agatha is a woman from the

---

6I want to highlight the problems implicit in these terms. In order to formulate working definitions, I have followed theorists like Judith Butler who have done the most to flag warnings about using these words casually. Distinctions must be drawn, even though these terms are related. When I discuss sex, I am aware of the contested notion of biologically determined difference. Sex, to me, means a culturally determined difference which is part of the social maintenance of corporeal intelligibility, yet sex and gender are only tenuously connected to anatomy. Gender refers to the socially constructed categories of masculine and feminine, and the deployment and re-deployment of these perceived social codes is the way one "performs" gender. In this sense, gender is an imitation. "Performativity" as Judith Butler defines it, refers to the experiential processes by which gender is constructed in relation to social codes, the formulation of a self-identity as masculine or feminine, and the continued self-maintenance of these processes, or their disruption, through repetition. Sexuality, finally, refers to socially and psychically produced categories of desire. See: Judith Butler, Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), and Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter, op. cit.
Roman past, an era of conflict between Christians and pagans. In aesthetic terms, she is a Venetian nude with Michelangelo-like musculature. Spiritually, she is in a transcendent state of fusion with the divine in the specific phenomenon that is martyrdom. Socially, she is a woman unlike most women, but still subject to contemporary perspectives about women in general, as well as explanations about women who do not fit the hegemonic codes (papal, patriarchal, artistic, etc.) designating normative female behavior.

The painted figure of Saint Agatha occupies all these positions simultaneously, burdensomely full. If I were to ask one central set of questions of this work, under the rubric of the larger questions above, it would be: how does Saint Agatha's body, her flesh, her gender, point out, and perhaps exceed, those very structural systems which place her? How might the painting, through its manipulation of artistic traditions construct meaning for its viewers; how do viewer responses construct meaning for those traditions? How might that meaning differ depending on the gendered positions of those viewers? Obviously I am making the assumption that gender is a non-autonomous part

---

7 Was Saint Agatha a historical person? According to Jacobus de Voragine, she was born circa 251 A.D. and lived during the reign of the Emperor Decius. See: Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger, trans. The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1941) 157-161. However, according to Kenneth Woodward, Agatha, Lucy, and Agnes are no longer regarded as historical figures; their names were dropped from the daily canon of the Mass in the 1960s when the Roman Catholic liturgy was reformed, although the virgin-martyrs are still honored on their feast days. Agatha's feast day is the 5th of February. See: Kenneth L. Woodward, Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 339. There is still a strong cult of Saint Agatha throughout Southern Italy; in Catania Sicily, the saint's birthplace, one can buy and consume pastries in the shape of breasts, see: Giuliana Bruno, Streetwalking on a Ruined Map (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 325. For the legend of Saint Agatha see: Margaret E. Tabor, The Saints in Art (London: Methuen & Co., 1908) 2-4; Carla Morini, "Una Redazione Sconosciuta della Passio S. Agathae," Analecta Bollandiana Revue Critique D'Hagiographie 9 (1991): 305-330; Enciclopedia Cattolica 1 (1948): 431-436.
of other meaning systems that are continually constructed and reconstructed through the workings of individual and communal identity.  

It is important to look at the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries anew in light of postmodern theories. Traditional studies have not assessed the roles played by subjectivity, gender, and sexual difference in artistic production and viewership, and how these roles are historically specific and implicated in social activities and spiritual practice. Sebastiano's painting is part of an interesting historical moment. This period, poised as it is between the advent of the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, has often been represented in terms which evacuate eroticism from spiritual concerns and vice versa in an enforced separation between secularity and spirituality. Attempts to draw a divide between the sacred and the profane are often symptomatic of hindsight regarding the impact of reform movements and the decline of papal authority. Studies which focus too narrowly on increasing secularization and the associated rise of the Burckhardtian "universal" individual can sometimes obscure the intricate connections that existed in the Renaissance between the sacramental economy and all other forms of social life. However, sacralizing all social practices presents a

similar danger, that of losing sight of how subjective and collective struggles helped to shape religious dogma and experience.  

Jonathan Goldberg has written that "... historic possibilities must depend upon mobilizations that would be unthinkable if history were segmented across uncrossable divides." Yet, even as this historical moment's similarities with the western present (implied by its common designation as the early modern period) are played out, its alterity and diversity from our own time must be kept in mind. It is hoped that my particular historical intervention, by formulating its questions from the present moment and deriving its answers from a distant one, responsibly contributes to representational issues currently at stake in feminist studies, feminist theology, and queer theory.

This essay makes no attempt to hide either my (often painful) wrestling with multiple historical discourses, or my recognition of this particular textual narrative as process. My methodology is indebted to and informed by recent studies which have begun exposing the fluidity of erotic, sacred, and gender categories and the intricacies of viewing pleasure in early sixteenth-century Italy. These studies should caution us against our own possible tendencies, both to replicate pre-existing exclusionary categories, and to read the body in dangerously transparent ways.

---

9It has been the contributions of scholars such as Paul Kristeller, Charles Trinkaus, Charles Stinger, John O'Malley, and Leo Steinberg which have done the most to reinfuse the Renaissance with those sacred components which have been neglected by authors intent on explicating the dimensions of its paganism and secular humanism. See the discussions in Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation: Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus, eds. John O'Malley, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).


11The reappropriation of the term queer as an identity category and, in Judith Butler's words, an "affirmative resignification," is both an opportunity for resistance and an enterprise fraught with limitations and difficulties. For a critical assessment of its pros and cons, see: Judith Butler Bodies That Matter, especially Chapter 8 "Critically Queer" 223-242.
Such transparent readings can have grave social consequences which are spelled out in the very concrete terms of life and death. Examples include one strain of the rhetorical strategies surrounding AIDS which demonizes not the disease but its victims, by further stigmatizing minority groups already labelled threatening and undesirable, and procreative technologies like IVF (in vitro fertilization) which, under the auspices of increased options for women, are rapidly becoming grand new schemes for the manipulation of women's bodies. It is because I believe that an unsettling of the established narratives of the historical past can determine the shapes of social changes in the present that I have undertaken this project. The phantasm Saint Agatha has not yet left me in peace.

---

12 A chilling account of the historical, current, and future dimensions of procreative technologies was given by Patricia Lee, "The Privileged Pre-embryo: How Traversing the Mindfield of Assisted Procreative Technologies Affects Women," Graduate Student Presentation Day, Centre for Research in Women's Studies and Gender Relations, University of British Columbia, 27 Apr. 1995.
8
Chapter 1
Problems in the Literature

For art historians to continue acting as though shifting border lines do not exist is to repress their sexuality and that of others, as though we are all rarified, neutered beings. The instability of sexual identity is a potentiality which current universalist, normative traditions prefer to deny. If visual artifacts tried to determine the sexual response and preference of their viewers, we need to make differentiations too in our varied experiences and to use imagination in our historical investigations of such works. We are sexed spectators now, and as art historians we interrogate sexed spectatorship then. The multiple interplays set up by these distinctions and tensions (how, for instance, does a lesbian viewer respond to images of women created for and by men? how did any artist cater to a patron or culture with different sexual expectations?) can be exciting, challenging problems which neutering assumptions kill stone dead.

-Patricia Simons

The stone dead killing of which Patricia Simons writes is something I have witnessed in accounts of the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha. I would like to discuss some of the problems in the literature which have facilitated my inquiry, but first some of my own assumptions (however self evident) must be set out.

Our view of the Renaissance is an accumulative visual and textual one, and history is predominantly and fundamentally a production of meaning. The materials scholars select and build narratives around tell us much about the historical placement and personal biases of those scholars. Formerly and traditionally, such biases were not explicitly acknowledged by the authors, who assumed they were operating within a degree of historical objectivity, but objectivity, as we now know, is not a possibility.

---

In traditional art historical scholarship dealing with the Renaissance, paintings have often been "explained" or "solved" through recourse to contemporary literature. Many such accounts launch an elitist trajectory, one which suggests that contemporaries who did not read certain texts or have access to discussions about them, were left out of what is construed as the intended original meaning of a work, and that this meaning would be the same for all viewers in-the-know. Within the last few decades, art historians have theorized the importance of audience responses and their role in the visual traditions of art production. Many art historians have abandoned the pursuit of one authorial meaning (whether of the patron or artist) and are instead asking the question: what did art works mean for those who did not leave written records, and how did those people contribute to the meaning of the works?

Art objects have their own traditions, and an iconographic emphasis which relies primarily on textual explanations for aesthetic decisions is often an unsatisfactory method. The questions about the painting that interest me most (those concerning sexuality, gender, and eroticism) cannot always be answered in the archive, but must be dealt with through a careful visual analysis of artistic genres and a reconstruction of viewing conditions. While I am probably making myself vulnerable to charges of

14 This approach followed the widespread tendency in the sixteenth century to draw comparisons between literary and artistic principles (evident, for example, in writings by Baldesar Castiglione, Pietro Bembo, Pietro Aretino, and Lodovico Dolce). See Mark W. Roskill, Dolce's 'Aretino' and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento (New York: New York University Press, 1968) 16.

15 Sometimes such theorizations are lumped under the category "Reception Theory." I will differentiate myself from such studies by saying that production does not designate authorial intention alone, and production and audience reception are not separate, with the former preceding and determining the latter (as is sometimes assumed), but rather they have a symbiotic relationship. Artistic productions are determined not only by the artist's working within, or reworking, an established tradition, but also by the social practice of consumption. Consumption is here defined not as a passive activity, but one that can, through interest and response, make or break the success of a particular product. This in turn has bearing on the artist's anticipation of potential viewers for a proposed work and their particular expectations. Multivalent meaning, not intentionality, is the result of this mutual dependence between artistic traditions and viewing responses. I thank Rose Marie San Juan for her clarification of the debate surrounding Reception Theory.
conjecture, that in no way lessens the potential value of raising more questions than I can
answer by opening up the image to pertinent issues that have not been grappled with
previously.

At the heart of my investigation, then, is the primary text - the painting itself - and its
visual traditions, the only site from which to extrapolate a viewing situation. This is the
missing information in the historiography of the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha. Before we
can reconstitute or recover a contemporary viewing situation, however, it is necessary to
examine some of the readings of the painting to uncover what they do, and perhaps do
not, say. Analyzing the shifting viewing situations and conflicts at the interpretive level
of these writings will warn us of the types of problems we will be facing.

The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha is not a particularly well-documented painting. This
neglect can probably be attributed, in part, to the unequal weight given to non-Florentine
painters in traditional Renaissance studies. Another reason is undoubtedly the
explicative difficulties it poses. In fact, it is the problems implicit in investigations by a
handful of writers which have provided an opening for my analysis.

I am struck by how scholarly discussion of Sebastiano del Piombo's painting often
registers a certain discomfort, presumably because this image seems to defy tidy
categorization. For example, there is some debate in the literature as to whether the
Martyrdom of Saint Agatha was commissioned for Rangone's titular church or for his
residence. In other words, is it or is it not an altarpiece?

Michael Hirst has discarded the notion that Rangone commissioned the painting for
the church of which he was deacon. Hirst believes the patron Ercole Rangone requested

---

16 Not only because of Florentine biases, like those of Vasari, but also to a less chronic desire on the part
of Venetians themselves to preserve documents with the kind of diligence exhibited by natives of Florence
and Rome.
the work to commemorate his being raised to the cardinalate by the Medici Pope Leo X on July 1st, 1517 in the controversial great promotion.\footnote{Hirst 76. At this time Leo X appointed thirty-one new members to the College of Cardinals; see Charles Stinger, \textit{The Renaissance in Rome} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 12.} Cardinal Rangone was granted Sant'Agata as his titular church.\footnote{Sources do not elaborate on Rangone's church. It is usually referred to simply as Sant'Agata. If we follow Luipold Dussler's description "die altchristliche Kirche S. Agata," I think it is safe to assume that the reference is to the small ancient Arian basilica of Sant'Agata dei Goti. See: Luipold Dussler, \textit{Sebastiano del Piombo} (Basel: Holbein-Verlag, 1942) 53. The church still survives, and is located within the courtyard of the Convent of S. Agata in Suburra on Via Mazzarino, between the Viminal and Quirinal in Rome. For fragmentary and cursory information regarding the church, see: Diego Angeli, \textit{Le chiese di Roma: guida storica e artistica} (Rome: Societa Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1903) 5-6; Roloff Beny and Peter Gunn, \textit{The Churches of Rome} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981) 116, 264; Augustus J. C. Hare, \textit{Walks in Rome} 7th ed. (New York: George Routledge & Sons, n.d.) 318-321; Richard Krautheimer, \textit{Rome Profile of a City 312-1308} (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980) 32, 56, 127; Matizia Maroni Lumbroso and Antonio Martini, \textit{Le confraternite romane nelle loro chiese} (Rome: Fondazione Marco Besso, 1963) 382.} Despite the painting's subject matter, the martyrdom of the patron saint of the said church, Hirst bases his supposition on evidence in Vasari's second edition of his \textit{Lives} which states that the work was in the Della Rovere collection by 1568.\footnote{Hirst 77. Hirst thus denies Luipold Dussler's suggestion that the painting might have been intended for the church. It might be appropriate to point out here that the date of 1568 is after the Council of Trent, and a tentative suggestion could be made that the painting might have been removed from its original setting if it was found licentious by the Council's newly formulated standards. Or it could have been removed if it was found appealing by potential collectors. However, the removal of paintings from chapels was a very involved process requiring the permission of the patron's heirs, and ecclesiastical sanction. There is evidence to suggest that citizens could become hostile or riotous if an artwork well-known in the community was taken away, even if a copy was left in its place. Citizens might closely identify with a particular public place and its objects, and their motives revolved around the interrelated elements of religious veneration, the status of the artist of the work, civic pride, and aesthetic interest. See: Sylvia Ferino Pagden, "From Cult Images to the Cult of Images: the Case of Raphael's Altarpieces," \textit{The Altarpiece in the Renaissance}, eds. Peter Humfrey and Martin Kemp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 165-189.}

Uncertainty over the painting's placement stems not only from the paucity of documentation, but also, in modern studies, from the tendency to view the painting with twentieth-century eyes which assume its primary function to be an elite form of erotic titillation (thus supposedly making the case for a private commission). According to Hirst, the painting: "... can scarcely have been ordered as an object to excite devotion; it
was rather a collector's piece, however repellent its subject-matter may seem to twentieth-century taste."\(^{20}\) Or in the words of Edward Lucie-Smith: "Not only is the particular form of torture to which the saint is being subjected an overtly sexual one, but she herself seems to welcome it with far from holy ecstasy."\(^{21}\)

Hirst distances himself from that thing he sees as peculiar to the modern eye but that appealed to the tastes of collectors of the past. That thing, he intimates, was not a factor in, and in fact refutes, a devotional response. That thing is eroticism; Hirst allows it into his reading only in order to reformulate it because he finds it offensive in the public image of a saint, but it can be admitted to a more rarified private setting - the collection. He even expresses curiosity over its owner's response: "It would be interesting to know how the youthful Ercole Rangone reacted to this image of female beauty brutally assailed."\(^{22}\) It would be interesting to know, for Hirst, possibly because he no longer allows himself access to anything resembling that reaction, being of "twentieth-century taste."

Lucie-Smith not only allows eroticism to dominate in the image, since that is what he is looking for (and the topic of his book), but he also implies that Saint Agatha is going to enjoy the torture. In other words, he enacts a slippage which confuses the pictorial mode of the painting with the imagined subjectivity of its protagonist, implying something about Saint Agatha's moral character. He conflates her bodily display with a willingness on her part to experience desire. It is an orgasmic desire which Lucie-Smith disconnects from any devotional realm. Hence the dynamics of martyrdom, in which both male and female saints, during their fusion with God, often have anaestheticized

\(^{20}\) Hirst 77.  
\(^{22}\) Hirst 78.
facial expressions and do not suffer during their trials, are elided. Not only is there going to be pain, he suggests, but that pain is going to be pleasurable for Saint Agatha.

Both writers are male viewers. That is, they occupy gendered positions and enact gendered readings. As male spectators they are in a secure, historically sanctioned, position of authority, accustomed to being the intended and privileged viewers of female nudity. An interesting dynamic enters the scene when we examine a passage written by Clara Erskine Clement in 1899:

The story of Saint Agatha is so painful, and her martyrdom included such horrors, that it is not necessary to recount them. The picture by Sebastiano del Piombo in the Pitti, and others representing the tearing of the breasts, are too revolting for description; in truth, I could never so study them as to be able to write of them.23

At first, Clement's account seems similar to Hirst's in its distancing strategy. However, Clement hints at the horror of looking too closely. She resists viewing; for her, to gaze is to acknowledge a subject she cannot study, not because of the hideous form of torture (in Sebastiano's painting, the breasts are not being torn but are about to be torn), but because of its erotic implications. It would somehow be wrong to look for too long; the gaze is imbued with danger. She is occupying the place where male desire is traditionally enacted; it is not a place she can stay without consequences.

Already we are faced with personal reactions to the painting ranging from titillation to disgust. Obviously these three examples come from different time periods and different sets of circumstances. I have brought them together to show how their reactions, nevertheless, betray a common difficulty. The difficulty lies in how to deal with the fact that spirituality and eroticism are occupying the same scene of immanent violence. Their

23 Clara Erskine Clement quoted in Bruno, Streetwalking on a Ruined Map 326, my emphasis.
inability to allow this acknowledgment of a sacred and erotic interrelationship necessitates, for them, a private setting. To situate the painting in a public setting - be it in the church of Sant' Agata (that Hirst imagines only to refute) or in the Pitti (where Clement sees it) - renders it somehow repugnant.

Readings that favor a privatized erotic enjoyment (or disgust) construct the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha in one way. There is an alternate way that some scholars have chosen to view the painting which is equally as misleading as the assumption that it could not have been a devotional image in the strict sense of church decoration. These writers aestheticize the subject matter. The influences of mega-artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian are traced in the monumental, voluptuous, sensual, and muscular body. Here, in an excerpt from Giorgio Bernardini, is a typical example:

Il disegno vi e preciso, sobrio, libero; le figure mostrano uno straordinario vigore nei muscoli, che si vedono accuratamente segnati, i contorni delle membra sono netti, forti, in parte anche duri. Vi si nota uno straordinario rilievo, e tutto in questo quadro rivela la potenza, la forza dell'autore; esso e così determinato che pare senta della scultura . . . Il tipo della santa e maschino...Pure nel colorito, sebbene severo fiorentino, privo degli effetti smagliant che puo produrre la tavolozza veneziana . . . E da notare ancora che la muscolatura, quale e riprodotta, non mostra nulla di eccessivo, di veramente manierato, ed anzi il corpo della santa e modellato modo insuperabile, scultorio.24

If we return to that original Italian art historian, Giorgio Vasari, we will see a similar example of this viewing mode. Vasari, as mentioned previously, first saw the painting in the home of Guidobaldo della Rovere, and wrote briefly of it in his 1568 Vite: "... una bellisima Sant'Agata ignuda e martirizzata nelle poppe, che fu cosa rara: il qual quadro e oggi nella guardaroba del signor Guidobaldo duca d'Urbino; e non e punto inferiore a

24Giorgio Bernardini, Sebastiano del Piombo (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arte Grafiche Editore, 1908) 38.
molti altri quadri bellissimi che vi sono di mano di Raffaello da Urbino, di Tiziano, e d' altri.\textsuperscript{25}

What interests me, is the way this foregrounding of aesthetic issues, especially the presence of a female nude with Venetian resonances, or a Michelangelo type monumentality, tends to privilege notions of ideal beauty which subordinate or elide the theological implications of those very characteristics which are part of the painting's subject matter. The scholars saw the way in which two artistic traditions, one Venetian and one Tuscan, were being conflated, but stopped short of asking the question: what might be the significance (beyond stylistic concerns) of such a merging?

Aestheticizing the body presumes "universal" standards of "Beauty,"\textsuperscript{26} and requires the making of value judgments which obscure the significance of differences and resistences at the level of representation. Scholars privileging aesthetic contributions do not usually question or disallow the painting's suitability for Rangone's titular church of Sant'Agata, presumably because they sense that any erotic component has been sufficiently "classicized" into an appropriate high art idiom, as well as distilled as such within their very rhetoric. This rhetoric has been repeated in twentieth-century accounts of the painting. A tourist guidebook purchased from the Palazzo Pitti, where the painting is now situated, says of it: "E il culmine del classicismo di Sebastiano."\textsuperscript{27} But what are the underlying implications of this classical aesthetic in an image of a female saint? Aestheticizing Saint Agatha as an ideal classical body serves to normalize her out-of-


\textsuperscript{27}I Giganti della Pittura Sebastiano del Piombo (Alberto Peruzzo Editore, 1988) n. pag. This kind of accolade also typically serves to distinguish this period of "classical" production from Mannerism, and the subsequent debates of its influence, or not, on Sebastiano del Piombo.
ordinariness, slot her into a convenient category, and erase her disruptive difference, a
situation I want to rectify in this thesis and a difference I want to reinvest in the image.

Opinions favoring the painting's placement in a private setting owe much, no doubt, to
unstated preconceptions about paintings of Venetian nudes as Venus figures or
courtesans to be owned/possessed by the male patron/client, and as such have a degree of
legitimacy since this is indeed one aspect of the Venetian nude.\textsuperscript{28} It is here necessary,
however, to state two points. First, the possessing male gaze is not monolithic or
straightforwardly oppressive, operating the same in all historical circumstances in any
situation involving a male viewer, and the theorization of it has often led to an impasse in
examinations of the female nude,\textsuperscript{29} by contributing to an avoidance of the topic due to its
implications in "capitalist connoisseurial voyeurism."\textsuperscript{30} Secondly, these preconceptions
about Venetian nudes evacuate crucial information regarding the roles of specific genres
in particular historical circumstances and social settings. One must never forget that the
woman imaged in Sebastiano's painting is also a saint (and hence her relation to
courtesan figures will be different than that of a mythological Venus). Images of saints
had to fulfill certain criteria, criteria which differs from era to era. Social perceptions
about eroticism, too, are subject to flux, and should not be considered

\textsuperscript{28} Aspects of art patronage that are just beginning to be investigated include the dynamics of power and
desire that are operative in the practice of private art collecting. See: Stephanie Jed, "Making History
Straight: Collecting and Recording in Sixteenth-Century Italy," \textit{Reconfiguring the Renaissance: Essays in

\textsuperscript{29} There are a number of articles that have problematized the male gaze since its earliest theorizations.
One of the first treatments of the subject was film theorist Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative
Sides of the Camera} (New York: Methuen, 1983) 24-35; Edward Snow, "Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some
Problems," \textit{Representations} 25 (1989): 30-41; Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: the Gaze, the Eye, the

\textsuperscript{30} Pointon 11.
ahistorically as consistently the same. The specifics of female sainthood and the erotic
economics of the time period are two enmeshed issues that this study will attempt to locate.

To sum up, there are predominantly two types of literature about the painting, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive (but which might in some cases exhibit an unresolved tension): firstly, studies overtly concerned with, or appalled by, the erotic content and, secondly, studies that subsume the eroticism and spiritual elements within a formalist discussion. What these approaches indicate, is that strategies to describe the painting are caught up in a struggle. This struggle, I believe, is the result of an imposed, artificial division between the erotic and the sacred, a division that is endemic to much traditional Renaissance scholarship for two reasons. One is a perpetuation of categories initially imposed by Lutheranism. The other is the result of an overemphasis on the secularization of Renaissance Italy, especially in studies that focus less on the difference of this period from our own, and more on its similarity by using the rise of the individual as the marker of modernity.

Despite many art historical texts which enact this division, there is no stable separation between the secular and the sacred in visual imagery of the early sixteenth century. The physical and the spiritual are not fixed categories. Concern over categorization begins to emerge quite distinctly with reformers' critiques of Catholic imagery as too secular, something that Rome's representatives have hardly begun responding to in 1520.

---

31 Margaret Miles discusses eroticism as a constructed concept in Carnal Knowing 135.
33 Leo X issued the papal bull Ex surge, Deus against Lutheran heretics only on June 15, 1520.
It would be incorrect, however, to assume that an anxiety regarding the role of imagery, and the overlapping of certain visual traditions, was not already a concern at this time. As an example, here is what the humanist Erasmus said in his *Institutio Matrimonii Christiani* which appeared at a slightly later date than the painting (1526):

"All the greater is the sin of those who give a shameful content to those subjects which are chaste by nature . . . all these subjects are derived from the Holy Scriptures, but when they depict woman, how ingeniously do not the painters incorporate dissoluteness therein? And yet one sees paintings of this kind on altars during the celebration of the Eucharist, even though they are so unchaste that an honourable man should not tolerate them in his own home."\(^{34}\)

If anything, Erasmus describes in words what had been an artistic fact throughout the period - an aesthetics of eroticism (which was part of the revival of classicism and increasing naturalism) from which few figural genres were exempt.\(^{35}\) Later Counter-Reformation attempts to control imagery and nudity in art, and hence to respond to Protestant critiques, frequently failed due to the priorities of strong visual traditions, which never could conform to the strict prescriptions urged for them in written legislation.


\(^{35}\)The terms idealism, classicism, and naturalism are themselves fraught with difficulty. As Patricia Simons has said of *Bodylines: The Human Figure in Art*, an exhibition at the National Gallery of London in 1987: "The standard dialectic between classicism and naturalism is also accepted. We are left with an impasse, a seeming paradox which students and 'public' are still fed as though it were a perfectly integrated, non-contradictory truth: 'Roman figure-types were more realistic than others known to Renaissance artists, but at the same time these figure-types idealised the body'. Realism and idealism merrily trip down the aisle, hand in hand, to bow at the altar of Art . . . Bodies were not in this exhibition multiple and gendered beings or signifiers of contextualised codes." See: Simons, "Bodies and Contexts" 543.
Sebastiano del Piombo's **Martyrdom of Saint Agatha** provides an opening onto these larger issues. Erotic and spiritual elements cannot be separated in this work; they are codependent within the multivalent possibilities being articulated. In fact, what may have made such a painting compelling to early sixteenth-century viewers is precisely the fact that there is *no such division*. There are, rather, spheres of reference which intersect across Agatha's body, allowing opportunities for a variety of "sexed spectators."
Chapter 2
Production and Patronage

Certainly one of those sexed spectators was the patron. But, how can we discuss the patron and the artist given the scarcity of information surrounding the details of the commission? Perhaps we should examine more closely this problem of the painting's setting and how it relates to the artist's production and the cardinal's social position.

Discussions of the painting often highlight the artist as himself defying categorization through what is regarded as his markedly idiosyncratic production. Michael Hirst, who has written the one English monograph on Sebastiano del Piombo, justified his choice of this contested art historical category by stressing that Sebastiano's career "...cannot be 'programmed.' We find indications of this in general histories of the art of the period. In Adolfo Venturi's Storia, for example, the same paintings of Sebastiano appear in different volumes concerned with different Italian schools." Hirst turns this idiosyncratic production, which has so often been used against the artist, into Sebastiano's strength. "Lodovico Dolce, in his Dialogo della Pittura, treats Sebastiano very much as an artist who has sold out to the disegno camp; the painter has become a victim of the disegno-colorito controversy, a defector from the Venetian tradition." Hence it seems that Hirst is trying to posit a corrective interpretation in light of

36 Hirst xii. The genre of the monograph is problematic on a number of levels, one of which is its underlying assumptions: its adherence to, or attempt to fit artists into, an established canon of masters (hence its support of and contribution to that elitist and exclusionary canon); its celebration of the artist as a special type of genius, the notion that to know the artist is to know the work, etc. It might seem redundant, but is nevertheless necessary, to point out the danger of studies that privilege or preserve the canon of genius-artists and the notion of evolutionary style to the detriment of artists' positions as products of their societies and as social producers. For a reassessment of the artist's role, see: Janet Wolff, The Social Production of Art (London: MacMillan, 1981). To Wolff's three factors influencing the nature of artistic production - technological, institutional, and economic - I would add viewership.

37 Hirst 2.
Sebastiano's previous neglect or "misunderstood" motivations. Privileging of aesthetic concerns is often employed in such a way, either to proclaim the relative merits of Sebastiano (as in Bernardini's case), or to deride him as a minor artist, a derivative of Michelangelo (as in Dolce's case). Sebastiano is a Venetian artist with Roman design sensibilities, a prime candidate for controversy in the disegno-colorito battle.\(^{38}\) In art discourse, this battle was gendered, with color associated with matter/flesh (feminine), and design associated with form/idea (masculine).\(^{39}\)

Debates over the talent (or not) of the artist, and the aesthetic value (or not) of the painting, are irrelevant to the questions put forward in this analysis, although Sebastiano's position as a successful artist in Rome during the sixteenth century obviously bears on certain issues regarding artist-patron relations and representational motivations. Suffice it to say that the only interest I have in the artist pertains to how his production is implicated in visual traditions and audience and patronage situations of the Renaissance. Keeping that in mind, a few words about the artist's production are in order.

Sebastiano, whose family name is Luciani, was brought from Venice to Rome in 1511 by the banker Agostino Chigi to aid in the decoration of what later became known as the Villa Farnesina.\(^{40}\) Venetian painting was highly desirable within the system of collecting operating in Rome. The Sienese Chigi, according to Hirst, may have brought

\(^{38}\) According to Hirst, "Sebastiano's dependence on Michelangelo for drawings to help him in his painting had become a stick with which to beat the one great Venetian artist who had gone over to the disegno camp" 42. Conversely, artists who were charmed by the seductions of color were often faulted for using its effects to cover up bad designs.


\(^{40}\) Del Piombo ("of the seal") is honorary, referring to the papal office of the Piombo which was bestowed on him by Pope Clement VII in 1531.
some works with him from Venice. Sebastiano certainly brought with him his training in the Venetian aesthetic, and as a Venetian artist he was aware of those elements claimed as his city-state's contributions to art: luminous coloristic techniques, lush landscapes, and depictions of female nudes. After his arrival in Rome, Sebastiano began signing his paintings, and his autograph read 'Sebastianus Venetus,' a designation which not only shows the importance a birthplace played in the Renaissance sense of identity, but which was also in all probability a selling feature.

However, a Venetian aesthetic was not all he had to offer. As a friend of Michelangelo's, he was soon versed in monumental classicism, particularly as it had recently been manifested in large-scale figural statements in such Roman locales as the Sistine Chapel. His merging of pictorial traditions did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. In a letter of May 1525, Michelangelo passed on a compliment to Sebastiano that had been voiced by Captain Cuio about him: "you were altogether unique and were held to be so in Rome." In fact, Sebastiano, called by one scholar "veneziano michelangiolesco," and by another a "Romanized Venetian," quite likely utilized his Venetian-Tuscan blend to his advantage, carving out a niche for himself as a novelty in artistically competitive Rome. Nor was such a visual merging unique to Sebastiano. According to Carlo Ridolfi, Tintoretto had an inscription on his wall that proclaimed

\[^{41}\text{Hirst 32.}\]
\[^{42}\text{Hirst 3.}\]
\[^{43}\text{E. H. Ramsden, trans. and ed., The Letters of Michelangelo Vol. 1 1496-1534 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963) 160. Michelangelo's opinions of Sebastiano's talents did not remain constant. In the 1540s, he declared that painting in oils was an art fit only for women and lazy good for nothings like Fra Bastiano (it seems easel painting is being distinguished from the "virile" or "macho" art of fresco, and Sebastiano is being criticized for his habits later in life, presumed by Michelangelo to be characterized by wealth, ease, and luxury, ie. feminized). See: Andre Chastel The Sack of Rome. 1527. trans. Beth Archer (New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1983) 201.}\]
\[^{44}\text{Vincenzo Golzio and Giuseppe Zander, Le Chiese di Roma dall' XI al XVI Secolo (Bologna: Cappelli Editore, 1963) 255.}\]
\[^{45}\text{S.J. Freedberg, Painting in Italy 1500-1600 (Middlesex: Penguin, 1971) 78.}\]
'Michelangelo's design and Titian's color.' Whether or not the products issuing from Tintoretto's workshop lived up to this boast, the claim itself speaks volumes about appropriating pleasing inventions and previously successful working methods which were developed in different geographical centers.

The distinction made between color and design, so evident in contemporary sources, when collapsed in Sebastiano's work, certainly had a marketable appeal which served him well in his first decade in Rome. After Michelangelo's return to Florence in 1516, and after Raphael's death in 1520, he seems to have been one of the most renowned and sought after painters then living in the Eternal City (at least in terms of portraiture).

Turning now to how this idiosyncratic production relates to the patronage of the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha, why would Cardinal Ercole Rangone commission such a work? If the painting's primary role was to commemorate Rangone's elevation to cardinal, would not another genre, such as portraiture, have been more suitable to document an enhancement of social status? There is certainly no shortage of portraits of men in their red hats, and Sebastiano's portraiture was in demand. He painted many images of clerics, cardinals, and later Clement VII.

It seems possible that Rangone desired a work by one of the favored artists in residence in Rome at the time, an artist considered an innovative art practitioner, in order to advertise his own consummate skill and taste as a patron. Rome, like other major Italian cities of the early sixteenth century, boasted a developed display culture in which rhetorical and aesthetic virtuosity was crucial in order for the elite classes to mark out their social place. As a cardinal and as the member of a noble family, Rangone had certain responsibilities as far as maintaining a visibly magnificent lifestyle was

And this lifestyle, of course, included the commissioning of visual products. Wealthy patrons of the Renaissance were expected to commission both artworks for private use, to decorate residences, and artworks for the public benefit of the city-state at large, those found in family chapels or, in the case of prominent patrons, in large collections which certain select people would have the opportunity to view or from which they could study.

It seems feasible to me that Rangone wanted to celebrate his role in connection with the church bestowed to his care, and that the painting could have been intended for Sant'Agata. The fact that it was in a private collection within a few decades of its completion is not, in itself, adequate evidence that it was always in such an environment. Much of this subsequent essay will be an attempt to provide reasons why this painting could in fact have been an effective altarpiece. However, my aim is not to argue that the painting was absolutely in one place or another, which is ultimately impossible to prove. The real issue is how the painting generates visual interest and engages viewers.

This problem of the painting’s original setting raises the larger problem of the altarpiece category at this time. Judging from the comments expressed by reformers such as Erasmus, altarpieces were a cause for concern. Contemporary evidence suggests that altarpieces were being transferred from devotional public contexts to residences. According to Alexander Nagel:

47There is scanty information regarding the patron. Ercole Rangone was born in Modena, educated in the courtly tradition, and an accomplished musician who also wrote Latin and Italian poetry. From 1549 to 1552 he was an ambassador of the French court. He is said to have proposed to the courtesan Angela Greca, and is in fact pictured with her in the “frog posture” in the infamous collection of erotic prints known as I Modi (drawings by Giulio Romano, engravings by Marcantonio Raimondi, and accompanying sonnets by Pietro Aretino). See Lynne Lawner, I Modi, the Sixteen Pleasures: An Erotic Album of the Italian Renaissance (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1988) 82-83. See also: Georgina Masson, Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975) 86. Rangone is also mentioned in Baldesar Castiglione's Book of the Courtier (1528) in which he is described as a handsome youth, and a pupil of Beroaldo studying in Bologna.
... the trend to take altarpieces down from their altars and put them into picture galleries itself began in the Renaissance. This development was due primarily and fundamentally to the fact that the paintings themselves had changed, and had begun to elicit new kinds of attention and appreciation. The conversion of altarpieces into gallery pictures was one extreme consequence of a long history of volatile change and generic instability in the altarpiece.  

Some of these changes and instabilities include: "... the exploration of spatial settings and of animated, increasingly thematic, figural relationships [which] continually expanded and complicated the relationship of the image to its physical setting, and to its viewers...," plus "... great flexibility in the period with regard to the kinds of images considered serviceable as altarpieces...," and "contamination of the genres" in large part responsible for "... a further change in attitude, when the reverence traditionally inspired by the beauty and grandeur of altarpieces was compounded by a mode of appreciation that would later be called 'aesthetic' - and that brought with it the world of collectors and their agents." Hence there were new narrative interests being explored which spilled over from one genre to another, an interchange of ideas between genres, and overlaps in interest between contexts for particular genres. One of the shifts being outlined by Nagel is that of movable easel paintings replacing frescoes as the chapel decoration of choice.

Of course, images like the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha would not have functioned the same way in both settings - the church and the private collection. Each setting was determined by specific modes of viewership. Church viewership was constructed within a matrix of worship, in which the narrative interest - how effectively the painting could

---


49 Nagel 139, 141.
tell its story - was ascribed a key role (this is not to say that this was its only role). Viewership in the residence functioned within the framework of an elitist constellation of discursive practices, which included an interest in the skill of the artist and the aesthetic merit of the work (though again, this was not the only interest). The overlap of audiences and visual interests at this time - devotional, erotic, aesthetic - suggests that the painting could have been in the church initially and transferred to a home at a later date.

Patrons expressed interest in erotic devotional images, often requesting similar subjects for private commissions. In a frequently quoted passage, Leonardo da Vinci said: 'I made a picture representing a sacred subject which was bought by one who loved it and who then wished to remove the symbols of divinity in order that he might kiss her without misgivings.'\(^{50}\) What is implied here? Take away the halo or martyr's crown (Sebastiano's Saint Agatha has neither) and the saint can become simply la donna nuda? Aside from being a boast of the illusionistic skill of Leonardo to create a figure so true to life that the viewer falls in love with it, this passage also stresses that physical attraction and desire played a role in the relationship of viewers to painted figures. Vasari relays the case of a Saint Sebastian painted by Fra Bartolomeo c. 1515 which had to be removed from the chapterhouse of the Dominican monks at S. Marco because it was arousing women viewers.\(^{51}\)

We know that Renaissance viewers related in kinaesthetic ways to large-scale human figures in paintings. In Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Pittura*, published in 1435-6, his

---


recipe for an effective *istoria* has human figures as the primary ingredient; they are the carriers of the narrative, projecting their emotions via bodily gesture to the viewer. If the figures in a painting are unsuccessful, the painting will fail to move the soul of the beholder, and this, according to Alberti, is the primary purpose of art.\(^{52}\)

With these issues in mind - the artist's Venetian-Tuscan production which blurs genre types, the patron's desire for a particular kind of painting, the instability of the altarpiece at this time period, and the acknowledgment of room for erotic readings of religious images - we can specifically discuss the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha.

The choice of a subject will always entail some consideration of established traditions, and the conventions governing the imagery of that subject. In other words, we can assume that Sebastiano, upon receiving his commission, would have made himself aware of the tradition of Saint Agatha imagery, and the details of her legend.\(^ {53}\)

---


\(^{53}\) Here are the basic elements of Saint Agatha's story (which follows the general hagiographical pattern for all such stories about female virgin martyrs) as culled from a variety of sources: Quintianus governor of Sicily had heard of Agatha's virtue and beauty and wanted her for his wife, but she refused to worship pagan gods. He had her thrown into a brothel (a common, but usually futile, attempt to assault the chastity of Christian virgins), ordered her breasts to be torn (St. Peter miraculously appeared and healed her), and had her rolled over hot coals (but she was saved because of an earthquake). She died of her wounds in prison, and her bodily remains are said to be in the Duomo of Catania. Saint Agatha is the patron saint of bell-founders (because of the shape of her severed breasts?) and protects the populace from earthquakes (a piece of her garment could stop, dead in its tracks, the flow of erupting lava from Mount Etna. See: Jacobus da Voragine and Margaret E. Tabor. For a (by no means exhaustive) selection of studies of gender and Christianity, as well as writings regarding the general pattern of female saint's lives, see: Chris Jones, "Women, Death, and the Law During the Christian Persecutions," *Studies in Church History* 30 (1993): 23-34; Miri Ruben, "Choosing Death? Experiences of Martyrdom in Late Medieval Europe," *Studies in Church History* 30 (1993): 153-183; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) and Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Frank Bottomley, *Attitudes to the Body in Western Christendom* (London: Lepus Books, 1979); Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, eds., *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover and London: Brown University Press, 1987); Jean Laporte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (New
Depending on the patron's particular wishes and the artist's motives, this tradition would either supply models from which Sebastiano could adapt his own interpretation, or he might choose to refute or transform the conventional approaches with certain innovations. While I do not know what representative artworks Sebastiano specifically examined, I do know that whatever decisions he made would certainly have been determined by his understanding of the social practices of creating and viewing similar images.

What provided Sebastiano with his models for the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha, appears to come less from particular images of Saint Agatha and more from the tradition of the Venetian nude - now brought to bear not on a mythological Venus or muse figure but on a Catholic saint - and from general examples of muscular heroic male saints. This is what we now need to examine in detail.
Chapter 3

Venetian and Tuscan Traditions: Bodily Topographies and Constructs of Viewing

The male body may always be the standard in the game of signification, but it is one whose status is undermined by its unrepentant historical inconstancy.

-Thomas Laqueur

... any consecutive history of the nude which proposes a natural body outside culture against which art can be measured is a misrepresentation of cultural data and of the processes whereby it functions.

-Marcia Pointon

In dealing with the body statement of Sebastiano del Piombo's painting, a central aspect of my argument is based on a formulation of early sixteenth-century attitudes toward the body and erotic tropes. In the context of this thesis, I want to focus on two key areas that illuminate the interconnectedness of the physical and the spiritual in early sixteenth-century Rome. In this section I will treat the first of these areas, the blurring of visual modes through a conflation of two traditions of artistic production which are not only usually separate, but which also have conflicting connotations. The second area, to be discussed in the following chapter, involves the emphasis on the body of Christ in both visual and textual realms, and how it relates to wider religious practices and social codes, the subjects of the remaining sections.

The visual modes to which I refer are those of, on the one hand, the eroticized female nude, with its Venetian heritage and, on the other hand, the muscular female nude.

55 Pointon 33.
derived from male models, as evidenced in the art of Michelangelo and his followers. Sebastiano had intimate connections both with Venetian circles and Michelangelo's patronage circle in Rome. What I am suggesting, however, is more than a stylistic synthesis. The place to begin prying open this paradox is the visual genres themselves.

In the Renaissance, erotic images were not immune to utilizing religious messages. At this point it is enough to recall that mythological female figures being given resonances associated with the Virgin Mary. For viewers familiar with Venetian paintings in which carnality is presumed exalted to a spiritual level, spirituality also has the potential to be more carnal. Written philosophical notions cannot be so easily transferred to, or contained in, visual imagery in which such notions become more open to disruptive, and perhaps conflicting, readings.

Allegories drawn from discourses about sixteenth-century Venetian female nudes, which purport to explain them, utilize such phrases as the "awakening of spiritual love," or "internal as well as external tranquillity." These types of explanations might seem fitting when applied to the topic of the virgin Saint Agatha who, at the moment the torture commences, will feel Christ infuse and fortify her body by suffering the wounds for her. But these allegories fall short in explaining the paradox that Saint Agatha is not only objectified, on display, and unaware of the viewer's voyeuristic presence, but she is also a Christian virgin martyr and, in Christianity, not only is virginity a source of spiritual power, but passivity in the face of a death suffered for one's faith is equated with


active heroism. If Saint Agatha is understood solely as the passive object of a male drama, then the theological nuances of her active role as Christian hero are lost. Put another way, is her passivity that of the female nude, or is it the passivity of Christ, with its altogether different connotations of the glorification of the suffering body in an act of redemption? Or, more importantly, does the painting negotiate both positions, and if so, how does it do this?

Saint Agatha's body, nude from above the pubic line, is twisted in a serpentine curve, her neck and head turned to her right. Her hair is held back by a band and her face is of an idealized type which can be seen in other works by Sebastiano del Piombo, such as the woman in the left foreground of the 1510 Sacra Conversazione in the Venetian church of San Giovanni Crisostimo, or in La Fornarina of 1512, now in the Uffizi. Saint Agatha's fleshiness, and the painting's color luminosity are typically singled out as Venetian characteristics.

A representation of the female form, using the aesthetic vocabulary of the Venetian nude, predominantly associated with classical mythology and landscape settings and usually considered a secular subject, here becomes the focal point of a religious narrative. Yet there is something about the body of Saint Agatha which seems to upset the idea of a Venetian nude. Even while calling up certain aspects of this representational practice, her body also marks out a different visual formula, one involving ideas of heroic monumentality.

59 This still qualifies her for consideration as a nude; the Italian word ignuda also refers to semi-draped figures.
It is first necessary to investigate the Venetian nude as a value-laden art topos (with all its Renaissance aesthetic baggage of ideal classical beauty) in order to break down the "veneer of erudition" that has accumulated around these works and led to such an impasse or nadir in studies of Renaissance nudes. Eroticism is often evacuated from Venetian nudes, and yet, during the Renaissance, eroticism was often given currency through painted and written versions of classical myths. Tales involving sexual themes expose the fluidity of categories of sexual behavior and avenues for their legitimation. James Saslow and Leonard Barkan have demonstrated this in their studies of Ganymede in the Renaissance: the tropes of hermaphrodite, androgyne, amazon, and sodomite are woven throughout visual and written forms of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

What interests me, are the associations this Agatha might have called up for its intended elite audience, viewers familiar with the Venetian artistic tradition, and the Renaissance pursuit of sex and gender issues. Obviously, we will want to open up a space for viewers outside this elite category, particularly female viewers (especially following the tentative argument of the painting's placement in the more public locale of the church), and question how these viewers would be situated differently from male viewers in relation to social constructions of the body.

The first question we must pose: what role does the tradition of the Venetian nude play in this specific instance; how does it enhance, complexify, or alter the central

---

61 San Juan 127.
62 Saslow, Ganymede, and Barkan, op. cit. See also the following quote in Jean R. Brink, Maryanne C. Horowitz, and Allison P. Coudert, eds. Playing with Gender A Renaissance Pursuit (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991): "... a crucial aspect of Renaissance fashioning of self is the refashioning of others ... in the Renaissance cross-cultural questioning of gender categories, authors and artists enjoy playing with amazons and other antique figures who transcend accepted gender stereotypes" ix.
63 I appropriate this expression from the title of the book mentioned in the footnote above.
concept of martyrdom? As is well known, paintings of reclining and/or sleeping female nudes (first seen on late Quattrocento cassoni lids) began to appear in Venice around 1500 and make up a large proportion of non-religious Venetian Renaissance art. To many non-Venetians, or those who, like Vasari, saw Florentine art as normative, paintings of Venetian nudes lacked a narrative, and hence were an incomprehensible mystery, even though artists frequently created a mood by giving the figures an evocative landscape setting. Landscapes replete with reclining nudes were never a popular genre in Tuscany.

The most renowned representations of Venetian nudes are Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* of 1510 (fig. 2) and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* of 1538 (fig. 3). When we examine one of the rare instances in which Sebastiano utilized a mythological subject, his *Death of Adonis* of 1513 (fig. 4), we can see how he has, in contrast to those artists, absorbed the Michelangelo-esque aesthetic, that is, monumentality of figural form, in his female bodies. He has thus, by adding musculature, already begun to disrupt the Venetian aesthetic of softly contoured fleshy women. In addition, the somewhat heavy, even ponderous, poses of the women in the *Death of Adonis*, provide more potential for action than is evident in the reclining passivity of Venetian nudes.

---

64 Meiss 212. Specifically of interest is Chapter 13 "Sleep in Venice: Ancient Myths and Renaissance Proclivities" 212-239.
65 Meiss 214.
66 This is the only known surviving mythological painting by Sebastiano outside his Farnesina murals. Hirst suggests it was painted at a time when "works characteristic of the Giorgione circle were actively expected of him" 33. Its incorporation of muscular form has been discussed by other scholars. See S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy*: "... by c.1512 - 1513 he had achieved a working dialectic of Roman and Venetian classical styles. The remarkable work in which this occurs is the *Death of Adonis*" 111. And according to Hirst, "The painting is a true Venetian poesia, of a kind no other artist in Rome was producing as an easel painting on this scale at the time. The very support of the Uffizi painting emphasizes the Venetian element, for it is painted on a canvas of exceptionally broad and open weave which the painter must have brought south with him" 37.
The genre of the Venetian nude plays a central role in sixteenth-century debates about artistic skill in the rendering or re-articulation of "Nature." In Venice an entire narrative evolved around "Beauty" as an artistic feat accomplished by superseding the world of Nature, and making visibly manifest the divine orchestration of the mundane world. Nature was equated with matter, which was in turn equated with the reproductive ability of "Woman." Artists were creators who could both conceive of an idea and give material form to that idea; they could give life (in art) without relying on the generative capacity of women.

The female form, especially in tandem with a landscape setting, became one way for Venetian artists to demonstrate their capacity not just to imitate Nature (imitatio naturae), but to rival or even surpass the beauty of Nature (superatio naturae). According to Mark Roskill:

"... it seems likely that Venetian letterati of the period saw the female figure as the locus for a reconciliation of the conflicting principles of imitatio and superatio... in their eyes female beauty was inherently two-sided. Over and above the harmony and proportion of the human frame, it also involved the factor of 'appeal,' the components, in short, of what would now be called sexual attractiveness."  

Because the formal concerns being investigated by artists in this Venetian genre have been foregrounded, few scholars have involved themselves with this "sexual attractiveness." In fact, many scholars assume that the aesthetic goal was somehow

---

68 Roskill 25.
69 Reilly 84.
devoid of any erotic content (as if there were not an aesthetics of eroticism), eroticism being explicitly erased as a component of the discourse. For example, Richard Turner's discussion of the role of landscape in Venetian figural painting provides an explanation for the subject's popularity which revolves around the Arcadian or pastoral nostalgia of Venetian citizens. When he comes to a Venetian nude, certain oversights become evident. For example in his discussion of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, he describes it thus:

... an image which verbally described might seem sexually provocative. But nothing could be further from the truth... one realizes that a nude asleep in a landscape is a common-sensical improbability... an apparition of highest artifice [and furthermore]... our rapport with the goddess can never be intimate, for she is asleep, impervious to those around her. Like Eve before the fall, she is unaware of her nakedness.70

What Turner ignores is that Renaissance male patrons in private environments *would* verbally describe her. Learned men could gather around such images and evaluate the artistic achievements therein. It was an occasion not only to demonstrate their verbal agility and aesthetic knowledge, but also to enjoy the pleasures of the displayed nudity of the passive female form framed, even created if you will, by the articulation of a discourse that seemed to have little to do with the sensuality of the flesh possessed by the male gaze, but a discourse that nevertheless facilitated the opportunity for just such an enjoyment.

Furthermore, Venus' sleep is precisely what allows the viewer to take in her body voyeuristically, to enter this private idyllic world, uninvited by any glance from the woman herself. Turner gives as a possible prototype for Giorgione's image a woodcut

(fig. 5) from the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili published in Venice in 1499. Yet in this image a satyr, complete with erection, is exposing a sleeping nymph and providing an identificatory point for the voyeur-viewer. The author's misleading argument suggests that Giorgione's translation of the "crude" prototype into a "high art" aesthetic evacuates the eroticism implicit in the model. He negates the very real possibility that the naturalistic Venetian aesthetic *amplified* this initial erotic element. The viewer is the implied satyr.

Even though female figures are at the center of these Venetian proposals, Turner overlooks the fact that it is specifically women that are being formulated as closest to nature. He subsumes them under the defining category male. When discussing such images as Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* and Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow*, the author says: "...this quietude and peaceful union of men and nature is in both artists directed toward the same end, an invitation to reflection and contemplation." While such paintings may indeed be about reflection and contemplation, it does not necessarily follow that they are devoid of other less transcendent and more carnal possibilities. Indeed, it does not necessarily follow that erotic enjoyment and contemplation should even be pried apart into different categories. Turner himself seems to unconsciously tap into this issue. When he says "The sleeping Venus is touched by delightful uncertainties which only the spectator's imagination can probe," perhaps we should note the implications of his verb choice.

---

71 A. R. Turner 93. The supposed author of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili was the Dominican Francesco Colonna.
72 It is important to remember that in the sixteenth century, Venice was a major production/distribution center for woodcuts and engravings. An atmosphere of tolerance resulted in the dissemination of many erotic works. See: Lawner 15.
73 A. R. Turner 105, my emphasis.
74 A. R. Turner 94, my emphasis.
While denying the simplistic accusation that these are merely Renaissance "pin-ups," part of the Venetian vogue for paintings of unidentified beautiful women, there is nevertheless a space for them to operate on a more straightforward voyeuristic level. At the same time, it is important not to disengage this sixteenth-century voyeurism from its connection to certain debates. These debates involve conceptions about naturalism in the arts, discussions of the relative merits of the arts (the paragone), a new interest in landscape as an envelope for figural narrative and the accompanying formulation of women as being closer to nature, and a reveling in the classically inspired human form liberated from its medieval encasement of filth and sin and now glorified for its own sake.

It is crucial to recognize that, in conjunction with the aestheticizing of such figures, there is also a tendency in modern literature to naturalize aesthetics to the realm of universal Beauty or Truth. Turner again serves as an example when he says:

"... the figures seem a natural emanation of the landscape itself ... the effectiveness of the image depends upon our understanding it as a fully natural relationship between figures and setting ... The object of ... contemplation ... seems to be nature herself, the face of the land which holds locked within it the secret of our being." 77

75 Charles Hope, "Problems of Interpretation in Titian's Erotic Paintings," Tiziano e Venezia Convegno Internazionale di Studi (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 1980) 119. According to Hope: "... Titian's erotic paintings fall into two general categories. Those for major patrons outside Venice, and especially the poesie, belong to an established genre whose roots lie in Central Italy. Such pictures were sanctioned by the prestige of the classical tradition and they automatically acquired the status of high art ... But in Venice itself there was a distinctive local tradition of erotic paintings [the ones he terms "pin-ups"] which did not masquerade as anything else." Venetian clients, Hope asserts, did not need "the alibi of a classical subject" 124. I would say that for all Renaissance clients, no matter how overtly erotic the subject matter appears, a veil or alibi is always required, be it classicism, the paragone, artistic novelty, or what have you. The images cannot, in other words, be considered transparently or straightforwardly oppressive.

76 For Mary Pardo's take on the paragone in relation to Venetian figural painting, see her essay "Artifice as Seduction in Titian," Turner, ed., Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe, 60.

77 A. R. Turner 104-105.
An investigation of such images must reveal this relationship as a constructed one, and highlight this gendering of the land as female. Turner's perpetuation of this gendering of the land implies the dangerous essentialist parallel that women have the secret of life locked within their wombs. Naturalizing legitimates a forum for eroticism and objectification which bolsters and privileges a "normative masculinity." It is the female body that is the real object of contemplation. Objectification is the result of the "dominant scopic economy" which relegates female bodies to passivity so that they can be imaginatively acted upon. Both the landscape and the bodies of women are thus subject to male surveying, colonizing, and "civilizing" impulses, tendencies which play no small role in the maritime and mercantile trading center that is Renaissance Venice.

Of note is the way that the eroticism of Venetian figures - their appeal as unclothed naturalistic female bodies - has been veiled by, or subsumed within, certain humanist philosophical concepts, such as divine beauty or spiritual love. According to Renaissance NeoPlatonism, which Leonard Barkan has termed a "radically unstable" typology, the apprehension of beauty could lift one's mind to a higher contemplative state. Love plays a key role in this discourse, and it is "... a passionate as well as a sacred love, which makes all the categories of erotic pleasure recuperable for divine philosophy."
The female character, in this formulation, is displayed as fully and as tantalizingly as possible for an assumed male viewer, even if that character is derived from a narrative about a chaste or virginal woman. Thus chastity and desirability coexist in an intriguing tension. This is what Irigaray has termed "a double movement of exhibition and chaste retreat." The Italian word vaghezza is sometimes used to describe this "quality" of the beautiful woman as simultaneously modest and alluring. As one scholar has noted, this contradiction between chastity and desirability "...was not resolved in the images, rather it became a factor in the viewing process." As such, it had very real implications for the women who were under pressure to live out the conflict of this social code.

This "double movement" is evident in stories from antiquity, like the rape of Lucretia, and in religious stories such as Suzanna and the Elders. Suzanna and Lucretia when painted are often nude and displayed for the viewer. The heroines are embraced or leered at by males (in Suzanna's case by aged and lecherous men) who provide a vicarious entry point for the voyeur-viewer. This is the case with the figure, presumably the main antagonist of Saint Agatha's story, the Sicilian consul Quintianus, who is orchestrating this spectacle in the left foreground of the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha. He rests his right elbow and forearm on a cloth-covered support and looks directly at Saint Agatha's face, his own face a darkened profile. Of course the degree of ambivalence in such scenes, the slippery ground between the endangered modesty of the heroine and the seductiveness of her bodily display, is an integral part of such constructions, providing much of their pictorial interest. And it is something that, as we have previously seen, aesthetic of androgyny which I will be taking up in the chapter on the androgyne and the hermaphrodite.

---

83 Irigaray 26.
85 San Juan 138.
86 San Juan 136.
critics such as Erasmus were attacking as evidence of increasing secularity within the Church.\textsuperscript{87}

In the \textit{Martyrdom of Saint Agatha}, something is interfering with the usual subject-object split. If paintings of Venetian nudes facilitate the masculine subjectivity I have described, the nudes themselves are objectified (unlike history paintings of men in action). Having no identity of their own, they purportedly depict Beauty itself. This does not seem to be a genre that is completely appropriate for a woman with a known history, and a heroic one at that. We know that in portraits of historical women who held positions of power, such as Queen Elizabeth I, a woman could not be shown as an anonymous erotic object; her pictorial presence required viewers to be subject to her authority. She had to be desirable without being overpowered by the viewer's gaze. Similarly, in paintings of an eroticized Christ, in which a level of desire is encouraged, Christ's body cannot be subsumed by the viewer, because Christ must maintain the authoritative position. In other words, as a heroic woman related to Christ, something else, other than the genre of the Venetian nude, is required to make Saint Agatha convincing. Perhaps it is the idea of active heroism or heroic virtue which is relevant to a pictorial vocabulary of the body involving a certain monumentality and muscularity of the human figure.

Saint Agatha's pose is one usually reserved for the depiction of male martyrs such as Saint Sebastian, and is a deliberate evocation of the pose of Christ in flagellation scenes. This becomes apparent if we look at some examples, such as Sebastiano's own \textit{Holy

\textsuperscript{87}Ambiguity was deemed dangerous in reformation critiques, because it was considered to offer alternative "subversive" modes of experiencing religious imagery, imagery which reformers wanted to be straightforwardly interpretable and appropriately pious, purged of nakedness and licentiousness.
Family with St. Catherine, St. Sebastian and Donor (fig. 6). There are numerous other examples of the pose of St. Sebastian, with arms bound and head turned to one side, such as Antonello da Messina's St. Sebastian of 1475-76 (fig. 7). But perhaps it is Christ's body that offers the most telling model. In Sebastiano's well-known Flagellation fresco in the Borgherini Chapel of S. Pietro in Montorio (fig. 8), Christ is being beaten by tormentors whose dark-skinned contrast to his pale body resembles that between Saint Agatha's flesh and that of the flesh of her own assailants, and his pose is the reverse of hers, that is, his body twists to his left with head lowered further. Even though the fresco has a completion date of 1524, it has been shown that as early as 1516, Sebastiano was in possession of the drawing by Michelangelo of Christ at the Column, from which he took the pose for his fresco (fig. 9). This drawing, when compared to Sebastiano's drawing study for Saint Agatha (fig. 10), is quite similar. It seems that the artist, with the conscious intention of figuring Saint Agatha as an imitatio Christi, reproduced the pose of Christ in his depiction of her martyrdom. Saint Agatha's pose, based as it is on male prototypes, and exhibiting as it does a masculinity of the upper body, has the potential to disrupt the notion of an objectified female offered for the possessing male gaze - a much discussed component of sensual nudes, which have traditionally been couched in the rhetoric of idealized beauty.

Saint Agatha's pose and her masculinity offer, in fact, an uncertainty in terms of body type, a gender ambiguity. If any artist in the Renaissance has given evidence, in art and

---

88 This work has a history of dating and attribution problems, estimated dates for the painting range between 1505 and 1530, for a brief discussion of its history see Carlo Volpe, L'Opera completa di Sebastiano del Piombo (Milan: Rizzoli, 1980) 95.
89 There are numerous other examples, including St. Sebastians by Perugino, Mantegna, and a host of others. Perhaps, most importantly in the Venetian context, is Giovanni Bellini's St. Sebastian of the San Giobbe Altarpiece.
90 Roskill 235.
writing, of the arbitrary nature of gender constructs, it is Michelangelo. The practice of creating muscular female figures from male models is a case in point. Examples that spring to mind: the Libyan Sibyl from the Sistine Ceiling (fig. 11), and Leda and the Swan (after the lost original, fig. 12). In the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha, Michelangelo’s influence on Sebastiano is evident in the martyr’s thick neck, broad shoulders, the musculature of her left upper arm, and her sturdily defined torso. This practice does not work in reverse. Even though, for example, there are many Renaissance images of Saint Sebastian that might appear "feminized," they are not based on female nude models, but rather on the bodies of adolescent boys; this involves a different configuration of passivity and the penetrated body. Michelangelo’s figures indicate that it is the male form which is privileged as the pinnacle of anatomical beauty and the site of the reverence of the antique aesthetic. The muscular heroics of nude male figures were thought capable of revealing the inner workings of the soul.

Here we have reached one of the primary tensions within the painting: the notion of the male as the standard by which all beauty in form is measured, deeply grounded in the Florentine/Roman tradition, is dramatically the reverse of the Venetian situation in which the female form becomes the paradigm for revealing ideal beauty and exploring relations between the body and nature.

Heroic male nakedness is, in the words of Margaret Miles, "the site and symbol of subjective event," whereas female nakedness typically denotes objectification, passivity, and the consumption of beauty. Sebastiano, by drawing on both visual modes - the Venetian nude and the Michelangelo-like heroic body - in effect not only merges two types of nudity, but also gives Saint Agatha a kind of androgyny. Such complexities

---

91 Margaret Miles, Carnal Knowing 144.
involving physicality and gender ambiguity are issues which can, rather than produce definitive interpretations, open up a range of viewing positions. At the same time, it is important to remember that the idea of androgyny functions within what James Saslow calls the "prevailing misogyny of Renaissance culture, with its twin principles that men are superior to women...and that a woman is improved to the degree she models herself on masculine norms and forms."92

The coexistence of these two visual modes (Venetian nude and muscular female), can be linked to a dilemma inherent in the subject at this historical moment. How does one create a convincing female hero in a culture in which women of the upper strata of society are being increasingly relegated to a private environment,93 and in which women who work against the standard prescribed roles of daughter, wife, and mother, are viewed as manly or virile exceptions to their sex, if not abominations of the "proper" order?

92 James M. Saslow, The Poetry of Michelangelo An Annotated Translation (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991) 51. A note here on my use of the word androgyny: I want to make it clear that I am using the word in accordance with its complex Renaissance sense, in which it can refer to a prelapsarian spiritual wholeness while simultaneously being used as an appropriated classical erotic trope. I realize that in the twentieth-century the word androgyny occupies a heavily contested realm of usage, in which it is often used to erase the political issues at stake in notions of sexual difference and self-definition, the visual manifestations of which are then aestheticized or fashionized in mainstream media. In both the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, however, I think the word has the capacity to denote a deceptive "liberatory potential," the danger and attraction of the androgyne being that it both asserts original difference and claims to transcend it. The term "liberatory potential" is taken from Kari Weil, Androgyny and the Denial of Difference (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992) 1.

93 This is not the place to enter into current debates on the ideological nature of the public/private divide. The adherence to this bi-polarism has spurred much argument on the danger of dichotomous readings. Suffice it to say, I do not see the public and the private as mutually exclusive arenas, but rather two ideological propositions that are completely intertwined; each determines the other; each relies on the exclusion of the other term for its formation as a separate entity. The idea of the public and private as opposite and separate spheres must be replaced by a theory of their relationality. See: Susan Reverby and Dorothy Helly, eds., Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History (Ithaca: Cornell, University Press, 1992); Merry Wiesner, "Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation," Sixteenth Century Journal 18.3 (Fall 1987): 311-321. Wiesner asserts that projecting the public/private split, a nineteenth century phenomenon, back onto the sixteenth century is ahistorical and misleading, since in political and economic terms, the family was considered a public institution (316-317).
How does one depict a chaste saint in the artistic vocabulary of the Venetian nude which objectifies women and obliterates their capacity for subjectivity and action? Conversely, how can a woman be depicted in the artistic vocabulary of monumental muscularity which presumes that only the male is god-like and privileged enough to stand in proximity to the divine?

Sebastiano has exposed the inadequacy of the previous tradition of Saint Agatha imagery for depicting a heroic woman, but at the same time whatever models he draws on to make her more convincing as a hero, she must still conform to some previous standards of female beauty. This is a struggle fought out at the level of representation. By bending genre conventions, Sebastiano has altered the status of what is being depicted.

Viewers versed in the aesthetic enjoyment of Venetian nudes would likely discern an erotics of displayed nudity, and the viewer to whom the Venetian nude speaks is presumed to be an elite male one, as is the reader addressed by treatises on art theory. Of course, in practice, there were male and female viewers of images but, theoretically speaking, the intellect required for astute commentary on art would by definition be considered male. However, if this male viewer has any heterosexual desire to imaginatively possess the object which is Agatha, that desire will be complicated or frustrated by her masculinist resonance. This desire is confronted not only by the impervious chastity of the martyr but also by the "obstacle" of the loin cloth. And the

---

results of this desire will be violence and mutilation. This erotic proximity could, in turn, be tempered by moral distancing in order to distinguish oneself from the violence of pagans (Turks in the guise of Romans?) and to scorn their "barbaric" practices. Torturers of Christ and the saints had to be condemned as brutal, cruel, and morally corrupt, the foil to the presence of the divine body being defiled, and yet these are the very men who provide the identification through which viewers can voyeuristically access the erotic body of Agatha.

For some male viewers a same-sex desire might be acknowledged for Christ's male body, or the Michelangeloesque body, that form imprinted over the Venetian nude. And, for classically trained eyes, eyes that had roamed the prominent collections of antiquities in Rome, as well as savored the contemporary artistic results of such a high regard for antiquity, the reverberating erotics of sculpted male form would be evident in this image. These erotics and their links to homoerotic desire are a component frequently avoided in Michelangelo studies, but which I insist upon foregrounding, since Michelangelo so often and so strategically transposed these erotics from antique statuary to his own drawn, painted, and sculpted religious imagery. His drawing of the Resurrected Christ clearly makes this point (fig. 13).

Before concluding this chapter, a brief but important aside is in order. There is an erotic trope in evidence which favors neither the Venetian nor the Tuscan body tradition, but can appear in either one: the juxtaposition of dark-skinned male flesh with the pearly

95 While we can say that Renaissance individuals thought of themselves not in terms of a sexual identity, but in relation to a set of sexual behaviours which were or were not sanctioned, this is not the same as saying that options for multiple or overlapping sexualities did not exist in the period. According to Mario DiGangi, "... a central source of Renaissance queerness lies in possibilities for identification and desire across gender difference, a consequence of the absence of homosexual and heterosexual identities in the period." See: Mario DiGangi, "Opening Up the Renaissance Corpus," rev. of Queering the Renaissance, GLQ 1 (1995) 468. The gender ambiguity and ambiguous eroticism of the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha facilitates opportunities for queer readings.
white vulnerable flesh of either an assaulted heroine or Christ. In Sebastiano's *Flagellation* fresco, this trope is in evidence and provides another similarity between that work and the *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*. But this erotic trope is also visible in many Renaissance scenes of the aforementioned rape of Lucretia or Suzanna and the Elders. Perhaps most importantly it is in evidence in the paired couple in the left foreground of Raphael's *Galatea* fresco of 1513 in the Villa Farnesina (fig. 14), which Sebastiano would surely have seen when he was painting his own frescoes there in the same year. The use of stereotypes and somatic signifiers - racial, classed, or physiognomical others - in tandem with nude women was a way of not only contrasting good and evil, but also of heightening erotic tension.96 On either side of Saint Agatha, the slave of Christ, are two swarthy slaves of Quintianus, their soiled hands clutching long metal tongs poised around her nipples. The darkness of their skin offers what would have been construed as an unsavory brutish contrast to the virgin saint's skin, but a contrast making her all the more vulnerable and desirable.97

In this particular case, the dark skin could be a subtext referring to the current version of a pagan threat - the Turkish infidel - constructed by Leo X as a menace to Christianity that must be crusaded against.98 Robert Schwoebel has written that the Turks were...
perceived as excessively cruel: "... the inhumanity of the Turks was emphasized above all else, and the stereotyped Turk - savage and bloodthirsty, swooping down upon innocent Christians, and massacring them indiscriminately - was firmly established in the traditions of the West."\(^9\) It was the Venetians who had been the first Italians to learn of the 1453 Fall of Constantinople, though Venice tried not to let sentiments about the Turks interfere with their mercantile activities with them. The concern about the Turkish threat voiced in papal circles would not have escaped the attention of cardinals like Ercole Rangone. However, knowledge of the situation with the Turks is not an essential aspect of this erotic trope, the existence and deployment of which precedes the Turkish menace.

* * *

Agatha's pose, based on male prototypes, her relation to Christ's body, and her role as a Christian martyr, in tandem with the inevitability of an erotic aspect, results in a gender ambiguity. This ambiguity reveals a well-known paradox at the core of Christian belief: the seeming irreconcilability of the spiritual equality of men and women with the actuality of discourses constructing women's inferiority.\(^{10}\) However, this powerful androgynous fusion also intensifies and expands the eroticism of physical union with Christ, giving evidence of the lack of any strict boundaries between spiritual and carnal values. Viewers are implicated in a complex circuitry of sadism, masochism, barbarism, revulsion, transfiguration and desire. It is by grappling with these dilemmas that the intended viewers derive intellectual and visual pleasure.

---


\(^{10}\) This paradox is discussed by Graham Gould, "Women in the Writings of the Church Fathers: Language, Belief, and Reality," *Studies in Church History* 27 (1990) 3.
...Renaissance artists, committed for the first time since the birth of Christianity to naturalistic modes of representation, were the only group within Christendom whose metier required them to plot every inch of Christ's body.

-Leo Steinberg\textsuperscript{101}

One reason for the bodily transformation at work in the \textit{Martyrdom of Saint Agatha} is that Christ's body had recently assumed connotations of salvific carnality. The theological and artistic emphasis on Christ's humanity is usually associated with the spread of Franciscan piety in the thirteenth century; it was a piety that stressed the compassionate and human nature of Christ.\textsuperscript{102} The increased naturalism of Renaissance art, which frequently exalted the male form via an emphasis on classical models, could sometimes make of this human Jesus a Christianized version of the Greek athlete. In Margaret Miles' words: "The heroic male nakedness of athletic asceticism adds visual associations to Christ's nakedness, constructing a richly complex visual symbol in which strength and weakness, triumph and vulnerability are resolved."\textsuperscript{103} I would suggest not a resolution, but rather a continuous tension existing between passive and active states, and this is precisely what is at work in the \textit{Martyrdom of Saint Agatha}.

Saint Agatha's body centrally divides the composition, the dominant vertical element in the painting. She has no identifying saintly attributes - no halo, no martyr's crown, nor is she holding her severed breasts on a tray as is often the case in visual

\textsuperscript{101}Leo Steinberg, \textit{The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion} (New York: Pantheon/October, 1983) 16.
\textsuperscript{102}Steinberg 34.
\textsuperscript{103}Margaret Miles 143.
representations in the portrait mode, for example Lorenzo Lippi's Saint Agatha (fig. 15). Only the form of torture signals her story. Her head is above the heads of the torturers, who hunch forward on either side of her. In fact, it could be said that the heads of the two tormentors are on a horizontal axis which cuts across the vertical axis of Saint Agatha's body. In other words, the shape of a cross is suggested, and a link to Christ (one among many) is established. These links to Christ are pertinent to the argument that the painting could have been intended for the church of S. Agata.

Of course, every saint has an inherent connection with Christ. Elizabeth Castelli has said of the imitatio Christi:

\[ \ldots \text{there is always a nagging difference existing between the eternal model and the mortal copy. The mimetic relationship is motivated by the desire to erase that difference, to create sameness; but there will always be that unbridgeable gap between the model and the copy . . . [and] . . . there exists in the notion of imitation this tension between the drive to sameness and the inability to achieve it, an inability which creates hierarchy.}\]

How do artists visualize this mimesis in images of saints, the mimesis in which Christ is the most important figure, even when he is not pictured? There are images in which Saint Agatha's body is stretched out in a cross shape (fig. 16), or in which she is surrounded by tormentors much like Christ during his flagellation (fig. 17), and we should expect to find some such associations being made in the Sebastiano's Martyrdom of Saint Agatha. However this association between Christ and saint, I would argue, meant something very specific in early sixteenth-century Rome when Christ's body had taken on particular meanings, and this is what I now want to examine.

\[104\] Castelli, Imitating Paul A Discourse of Power (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) 68, 75.
The sensitivity to body imagery that I am arguing for becomes more understandable when one takes into account this new emphasis placed on the body of Christ in visual imagery, and how it intersects both with incarnational theology at the papal court, which focuses on Christ's humanity, and with more general religious practices emphasizing bodily experience in imitation of him. Kenneth Woodward has said that: "Catholic saints make sense only within a world where the 'body of Christ' is more than just a metaphor." In other words, if Christ was fully human, then every part of his body must have special significance.

The dramatization of Christ's genitalia, evidenced in the art of this period, is part of this focus on Christ's humanity, as Leo Steinberg has incontrovertibly demonstrated in his book The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion. Readers unfamiliar with this visual tradition, can consult any number of images that prove the point (fig. 18-21). There is some debate as to whether this interest involves sexuality (with erection being symbolic of resurrection and the phallus as an "anti-death weapon" or whether it is a reminder of the bleeding flesh of the Circumcision as the link to our own suffering humanity. There is no doubt, however, that representations of the dead or risen Christ often give prominence to the loin cloth.

As previously mentioned, implicit in the dynamics of sainthood is a likeness to Christ. A martyrdom is the zenith of the imitatio Christi concept. This leads to a key issue, which, to the best of my knowledge, scholars have not noticed, or if noticed, have not commented on: the way in which the body of this early Roman virgin martyr is related through visual devices very specifically to the body of Christ. These devices range from

---

105 Woodward 403.
106 Steinberg 46.
107 The debate between Leo Steinberg and Caroline Walker Bynum will be taken up shortly.
compositional strategies (like the implied cross shape) to the choice of objects included in the painting. Not the least of these visual references is the perizonium or loin cloth (an object dealt with extensively by Leo Steinberg). In an unusual (and to my knowledge unprecedented) adaptation, this female saint wears a similar garment; the shape of the knotting seems to imply male genitalia. She does not wear the transparent gossamer fabric which is so often wrapped around the hips of Renaissance female nudes. The drapery Saint Agatha wears, referring as it does to the loin cloth of Christ through an implied erection (the knot and cloth bundle of which a detail can be examined in fig. 22), further increases the physiognomic ambiguity created through the saint's muscul arity and pose.

Other devices linking Saint Agatha with Christ include the implements of torture. There are varying accounts of the weapons used for the martyrdom. They can be scythe-like instruments, saws, tongs, hooks, shears, or pliers. Utilizing the genre of Arma Christi altarpieces which depict the instruments used to mock or torture Christ at the Passion (fig. 23-25), it can be seen that the weapons the antagonists are holding in the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha are similar to the tools that were used to withdraw the nails from Christ's hands and feet after his death, and that sometimes lie beside his body in deposition scenes (fig. 26). As such, they carry the poignant associations of these objects, objects often depicted as separate entities in Arma Christi scenes. On another level, however, the ends of the tools are located around the nipples at the spot mouths and fingers might otherwise be, and the linkage between violence and sexual activity is made all the more apparent.

In the right foreground, a large knife rests diagonally across the top of a slab of stone. Such stone parapets were frequently used in the foreground of Renaissance paintings (particularly portraits and Madonna and Child scenes), and derive from antique funerary traditions. Parapets can serve several functions according to David Rosand: as memorial devices, as reminders of both the altar and tomb of Christ, as places on which artists can put their signatures, and, in their alliance with and their calling attention to the frame, they also provide "a barrier between sitter and spectator that is meant to be traversed." I would say that the parapet in this painting is doing all these things.

The knife raises a number of possible associations. Its most basic role is as an illusionistic device which punctures the picture plane, seemingly to jut out of the picture space. Not only is it a threatening invitation for the viewer to join in the violation, and the foreshadowing of a possible removal of the breasts after their mutilation, but it may also be a sign, in its directional alignment with the genitals, of the circumcision - significantly the event in which the Savior's blood was first spilled and a precursor to his own martyrdom on the cross. And, from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries onward, such knives were commonly pictured in Arma Christi altarpieces as an indication of this first stage in Christ's Passion (fig. 23-25). And in some scenes, such as the Circumcision c. 1450 by the Master of the Tucher Altarpiece (fig. 27), the knife used is disconcertingly large. It is the circumcision which guarantees that Christ's fleshly

---

110 Rosand 104.
embodiment is real; in Augustinian terms the spilled blood of the circumcision plays a key role in the remission of original sin.\footnote{On the circumcision see Steinberg's excursus in The Sexuality of Christ 157-164.}

This can be carried a step further. The lack that was Saint Agatha is now full of the self that is Christ. The body of "Woman" is a site for the inscription of male cerebral processes. The threat that was the strong autonomous woman is now subsumed, but not erased, within the dynamics of male subjectivity. The threat remains as a specter - the phallus - vulnerable to castration. Symbolically, Saint Agatha has a penis. The knife can not only circumcise but also castrate her, which will return her to the realm of lesser being that is the material locus of woman in the Platonic system. Or will it? As Carolyn J. Dean has suggested, for certain male theorists, "Castration and virility are not at all incompatible;" the threat of loss, the self experienced as punished or mutilated, can be erotic, and repression, to paraphrase Georges Bataille, can become a condition of pleasure.\footnote{Dean 243-245.}

Her phallic disguise gives her temporary Christ-like power, but this spiritually associated power is simultaneously agitated by her sensual "allure" in the world of appearances, the world of the Venetian nude in which material things are gendered female. By implication, or perhaps in addition, Christ is to a degree feminized. The masculine component is threatened with "contamination" through its proximity to the abjected feminine, which must be subordinated, especially since Saint Agatha has usurped one of the main physical foci of male sexual power. This struggle between the material and the transcendental and their gendered aspect, this struggle between the physical and the rational, points out how impossible it is to represent female subjectivity within a male-defined symbolic language.
Yet, hegemonic male terms will always be haunted by the threat of the return of the subordinated Other. If we view Quintianus, and by implication, the male artist/patron/viewer, as the Subject-self, we can follow Donna Haraway's formula:

The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows that by the service of the other, the other is the one who holds the future, who knows that by the experience of domination, which gives the lie to the autonomy of the self. To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial.114

The Object-other which is Agatha barely contains this potential eruption into multiplicity. The removal of her breasts will make Agatha, physiognomically speaking, more male. Just as the saved Christian body can be reconstituted from fragments in the afterlife, so too are Saint Agatha's breasts miraculously restored by Saint Peter in her legend. So, even if removed, the viewer who is familiar with the story knows, her breasts will return.

Examine the tension reverberating between imaginative poles: the knife picked up, wielded, and put down, the breasts whole, severed, and restored, the loin cloth penis circumcised/castrated and resurrected; enact the specter of disappearing and reappearing parts, the fragmentation of bodily integrity. This imaginative tension flickers across a High Renaissance classicized and idealized body, the very autonomy of which is profoundly threatened. This disruption at the level of representation is what renders aesthetic discussions of the painting's classicism wholly inadequate, at least in terms of its formulation as a stable body with unassailable boundaries between itself and the

world. Women's bodies have always been problematic in terms of the classical body, and many Renaissance theorists believed women's bodies to be naturally grotesque.¹¹⁵

What allows for this free play of sexed anatomical parts if not an awareness of their instability or lack of fixity in the first place? We must remember that the Renaissance did not have the scientific constructs of our time in which to posit various phenomenon (such as biology, itself a system which, despite empiricist claims, is open to critiques of essentialism). In addition, the very popularity of certain tropes which upset distinct norms of gender difference (the figure of the hermaphrodite and androgyne) provides an indication that the terms of the debates had a certain mobility.

In order to understand what all of this serious gender play might mean, we can examine two discursive areas to which the patron and artist (and many viewers) were no doubt privy: orations of the papal court, the subject of this chapter, and written accounts of female piety circulating at the time, which will be taken up in the next chapter.

What John O'Malley has termed "incarnational theology"¹¹⁶ came to the Renaissance via the Greek Church Fathers and through the more recent history of meditations on the humanity of Christ, characteristic of, for example, the twelfth-century Bernard and the thirteenth and fourteenth-century Franciscans. Within the papal context, the emphasis on Christ's physicality was quite specific. Intimately involved with studia humanitatis and epideictic rhetoric promoting the 'dignity of man' theme¹¹⁷ was the ostentatio genitalium, a term coined by Steinberg which means the revealing of Christ's genitals.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷Steinberg (John O'Malley's commentary in The Sexuality of Christ) 200.
¹¹⁸Steinberg 1.
Sebastiano's patron, Cardinal Rangone, if not actually present at papal liturgical proceedings, certainly would have been familiar with the orators' forms of delivery and their subject matter. Preachers from the mid-fifteenth to the early sixteenth century were profoundly involved with incarnational theology. By newly linking the significance of Christ's human bodily form to the Redemption mystery, orators implied that when God took on flesh, humanity was saved. In this corporealized devotion, the spirit unfolds through matter. This differs from the previous highlighting of Christ's death on the Cross or his Resurrection as the salvific moments. The flesh, then, takes on a much more positive connotation than it had formerly held, and Christ - whose very existence was proof of the value accorded by God to the mortal body, clothing as he did the Word in Flesh - exhibits, in Leo Steinberg's words, "a nakedness immune to shame."

If the Godhead incarnates itself to suffer a human fate, it takes on the condition of being both deathbound and sexed . . . to profess that God once embodied himself in a human nature is to confess that the eternal, there and then, became mortal and sexual.

It is beyond doubt that there is an interest in the genitalia of Christ in the visual remains of this period, and this interest does tend to be polarized in scenes of either Christ's infancy or his death and resurrection. And I believe Steinberg is quite right when he states that to relieve Christ of the full burden of human flesh, its appetites and desires, "is to decarnify the Incarnation itself." However, that this very interesting theological line of thought can be reduced almost entirely to the penis alone is a suspect proposition.

---

119 O'Malley bases his evidence on over 160 sermons given in the presence of the Popes during liturgies between 1450 and 1521; see Praise and Blame 3.
120 O'Malley 138.
121 Steinberg 18.
122 Steinberg 13.
123 Steinberg 17.
The fact that the well-known visual trope of the erection under the loin cloth can appear in a depiction of a female saint is proof that there is more to the humanity of Christ than straightforward phallocentrism. As Richard Rambuss has shown, Christ's entire body was eroticized, sometimes symbolically male, sometimes symbolically female, sometimes an indeterminate mixture of both. His body was rendered open, penetrated by nails, thorns, and spear, a polysemous surface with orifice-like wounds. His pierced side could be made analogous to a lactating breast or, when depicted separately from Christ's body in Arma Christi altarpieces, the wound could look like labia. This can be seen in fig. 28; the wound is below Christ's right arm.

By privileging doctrinal explanations, Steinberg does not explore the wider ramifications of gender and sexuality. He also, for all his iconographic prowess, fails to closely examine the classical aesthetic in many depictions of the naked Christ, which is being combined with the Renaissance doctrinal notions he is privileging. Rambuss astutely describes this shortcoming: "Scrupulously left unexplored by Steinberg is any notion that such a display of the beautiful male body could also function as an erotic icon." The entire idealized male body is eroticized. However, Steinberg locates the sexual, as sign of humanation, almost entirely in the genitals. As Caroline Walker Bynum has argued in her critique of Steinberg, this is an ahistorical and narrow view of sexuality which, in Christological terms, has little to offer female worshippers. Bynum offers an intriguing interpretation of Christ's humanity in her book Fragmentation and Redemption. She sets forth the argument that there is a component of bodily

---

125 Rambuss, 266.
suffering and pain in religious imagery and worship which is part of a larger system, and that the Incarnation as a bodily phenomenon cannot simply be equated with genitalia. This is a system, furthermore, which will be negotiated differently by male and female viewers. "There is . . . better evidence for the assertion that the late Middle Ages found gender reversal at the heart of Christian art and worship than there is for the thesis that Renaissance artists emphasized the sexuality of Jesus."127

As valuable as her work continues to be, in her critique of Steinberg, Bynum does not discuss how, in the early sixteenth century, there is a naturalism in art that enhances Christ's physical being by giving it the classical resonance of male nudes of antiquity, and that this brings with it an entirely different inflection.128 Therefore, while she is certainly correct in pointing out the significance of gender reversal within Christianity, and the fluidity of categorical definers, there is still to be dealt with the predominant aesthetic in central Italy which privileges the male body and male sexuality - of which Michelangelo is the most telling example.

As an aside, the gender reversal of which Bynum speaks has a visual currency outside of, as well as within, art production. Traditions within religious theater, such as the sacre rappresentazioni, or religious processions, had men playing the parts of female saints, and martyrdoms re-lived as convincingly as possible in all their gory detail. Medieval and Renaissance theatre was "a site of cultural production in which conflicting social ideologies could be dramatically displayed and perhaps symbolically resolved . . . "129

---

127 Bynum, Fragmentation 92.
128 Not only does it involve an inflection of the classical formation of a homo-aesthetics (if we can anachronistically apply the term), but the notion of Christ as a heroic spiritual athlete, which must be manifested in a well-developed physicality.
We should not underestimate the impact of such shared cultural codes, which are part of these entertainments, on the psyches of their observers or participants.

Back to Bynum's analysis, there is an assumption that she seems to make with regard to women's religious experience, the assumption that the suffering and pain of female bodies engaged in imitation of Christ, while fully implicated in bodily metaphors, involves asceticism and eroticism as two separate modes of the imitatio Christi experience. Hence, for Bynum, suffering is unerotic. What Bynum forefronts in the relationship between female bodies and Christ is fertility, blood, and decay, all of which are seen as somehow beyond the realm of sexuality.

In a later book, Bynum somewhat shifts her earlier statement about gender reversal when she says:

Gender symbols . . . when they are found at the heart of a religious tradition . . . seem not so much to communicate information about gender - expressing its meaning for society or even rejecting that meaning - as to conjure up the basic human fact, both glorious and painful, of multiplicity and fragmentation itself.¹³⁰

But what is more at the heart of fragmentation and multiplicity than gender divisions and sexual difference? Not basic human facts, but created facts. In Bynum's thought provoking work, sexuality and physicality, being rendered somewhat one dimensional, fit too neatly within a schema, rather than threatening to fragment that schema into multiplicity.

Certainly the work of both Steinberg and Bynum has been extremely influential for my project. However, we must be cautious with some of their assumptions if we are to...

delve deeper into Renaissance notions of gender and eroticism, since neither of these scholars admits that there is undeniably more than one set of identifiable beliefs about the body at work in the early sixteenth century. Perhaps it is space for diversity and conflict that needs to be made.

In order to get at this very convoluted issue, I would like to examine what I view as a juncture between types of belief systems. At this juncture are strands from three modes of thought: the previously discussed incarnational theology of the papal court which stresses God's taking on of human form as a key salvific event; the argument made by male writers that holy women have "become male;" and practices from female piety in which women associate their corporeality with Christ's suffering flesh. It is by considering these various currents and their overlapping that we can examine how the body of Saint Agatha is discursively placed.
Chapter 5
"Becoming Male"

... the somatic idioms of cultures often work on several levels at once, and provide some access to a culture's understandings of the intersections of different planes or realms of social meaning.

-Elizabeth Castelli

... the particular attention to the female body as an object of display in the martyrological tradition betrays male confusion over how to interpret the lives of heroic women. While naked female martyrs are an ever-present feature, the naked bodies are at once a sign of their own resistance to social power and a sign that females remain, at some level at least, inscribed as sexualized beings for male viewers/spectators/readers.

-Elizabeth Castelli

Hagiography ... insists on a bodily geography and offers an encyclopedia of the body, constructing its somatic topography.

-Giuliana Bruno

The new interest in Christ's body, as manifested in visual and textual realms, needs to be placed within the context of certain aspects of contemporary piety and Christian thought, as well as considered in relation to Renaissance attempts to define women's roles. It is significant that in the Renaissance, the lives of urban women of the

133 Bruno 328.
mercantile classes were circumscribed within increasingly narrow parameters. The new focus on the family and its alliance with other families generated tracts regarding proper roles for women. Wifehood and motherhood were considered essential to the perpetuation of a strong family line, both in moral and economic terms. The dowry system kept upper-class women in a state of conjugal dependence as the family was being reconstituted in relation to shifts in commerce, consumption, and leisure. Often the daughters who were sent to convents, unless they chose that direction in life, were those who were "superfluous." The daughters who did not fit aesthetic codifications of beauty, or lacked socially desirable feminine traits, were the least likely to be married, and the most likely to be relegated to nunneries, since this was a more economical option than supplying them with dowries.

Stereotypes of female sexuality and correct behavior became increasingly rigid, and distinctions between the sexes more important to define, not just for medical purposes,
but also (and mainly) for political, economic, and legal reasons. A number of authors from varied socio-economic classes writing for diverse audiences and purposes, seemed to hold views about women in common. Francesco Barbaro, San Bernardino, and Alberti advised that a woman should be, above all, chaste, modest, silent, and obedient. These very passive traits imply that an internalizing of emotion is desirable.

Through a juxtaposition of feminine virtue (itself uneasily combining a desirable yet chaste body) and the ability to endure internal suffering, loyalty to the conjugal bond was constituted not as a moral duty but as a unique opportunity for women to enact a heroic choice; this tactic was used in sixteenth-century manuals of female conduct in which the female virtue of selflessness was likened to male heroic action. However, since depictions of deviant female sexuality also parallel physical desirability with physical suffering, the distinctions between the pleasure of virtuous suffering and the suffering of deviant females were (like the distinctions between chastity and seductiveness) necessarily blurred.

It is precisely such urgent and problematic attempts to outline desirable female conduct which point out the actual instability of gender roles and the anxiety it caused.

Specifically at issue in terms of Saint Agatha is the conflict between the argument that holy women have "become male," and practices from female piety in which women associate their corporeality with Christ's suffering flesh. It has been extensively argued

\[^{135}\]Wiesner states: "As sixteenth-century men debated women's nature, becoming more obsessed with women's sexuality and controlling unmarried women, gender became increasingly important as a determinant of human experience." 18.

\[^{136}\]Leon Battista Alberti, The Family in Renaissance Florence, trans. Renee Neu Watkins (Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1969) 83-213. The Italian title is I Libri della famiglia (c. 1434); it was a tract written for the lesser nobility and merchant classes. Francesco Barbaro, "On Wifely Duties," The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society, eds. Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978) 179-228. On Wifely Duties or De re uxoria (1415-16) was a gift for Lorenzo de' Medici on the occasion of his marriage to Ginevra Cavalcanti and its intended audience was an elite scholarly one. Among the mendicant friar San Bernardino's forty-five sermons in Le Prediche volgari (1427), are three specifically devoted to marriage relations; San Bernardino da Siena, Le Prediche volgari, ed. Piero Bargellini (Milan and Rome, 1936), sermons XIX, XX, XXI.

\[^{137}\]San Juan 139.
that the early Church Fathers feminized the flesh and masculinized the mind and spiritual achievement.\textsuperscript{138} This is reiterated with regard to Christ in the oft quoted statement made by Hildegard of Bingen: "man signifies the divinity, woman the humanity of the Son of God."\textsuperscript{139}

The humanist involvement with antique literature included a return to patristic writings.\textsuperscript{140} The overcoming of the flesh was a Christian process, and such an idea was crucial to the notion of the female faithful's "becoming male," a concept best known from Thomas, Origen, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine.\textsuperscript{141} Such an aesthetic denial of the body nevertheless emphasizes the body as \textit{the} site for the playing out of this denial. The body, in short, becomes an essential and active instrument for the attaining of salvation.\textsuperscript{142}

Men were considered physically closer to the image of God and, consequently, nearer spiritual favor. As with the aesthetics of the Michelangelo-like nude, this rarely worked in reverse. In the \textit{Workes} of Ambroise Paré is the statement: 'some women have been changed into men: but you shall find in no history men that have degenerated into women; for nature alwaies intends and goes from the imperfect to the more perfect, but not basely from the more perfect to the imperfect.'\textsuperscript{143} The elevating of the category male

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{138}Howard R. Bloch, \textit{Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 9, 46.
\item \textsuperscript{139}Joan Cadden, \textit{Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages. Medicine, Science, and Culture} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 191.
\item \textsuperscript{142}Geoffrey Harpham, \textit{The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) xiv.
\item \textsuperscript{143}Paré quoted in Jones and Stallybrass 84.
\end{itemize}
to a superior standard of being required a negotiation of female behavior that was commendable and approximated male achievements.

Pious women who demonstrated spiritual achievement (as well as pagan women of antiquity who demonstrated political acumen beneficial to the polis) were awarded praise, by male theologians and cultural spokesmen, for transcending their female "weakness" and exhibiting heroic characteristics, such as the male trait of virtue. Virility was a term frequently applied to Christian holy women.144 This was not a phenomenon restricted to saintly display. Learned women humanists and writers (who were often also nuns) were similarly upheld as exceptions to their sex. Michelangelo would later verbalize his admiration for Vittoria Colonna in terms which masculinized her accomplishments, in fact describing her as "a man within a woman" and referring to her as his amico rather than his amica.145 Giovanni Boccaccio's De mulieribus claris is a good example of an account that, while offering praise for mythological and historical women's deeds, simultaneously fashions these deeds as exceptional, and hence does not advocate social changes to make contemporary life conducive to similar virtuous acts by Renaissance women.146

"Becoming male" was a male-constructed literary perspective that did little to further actual female spiritual and intellectual equality. It was, however, a concept with extensive appeal, especially in hagiography. At the heart of martyrdom is an inversion of power relations. According to Origen, the act of martyrdom reveals a set of reversals:

144 Elena Ciletti, "Patriarchal Ideology" 63.
146 For this view of Boccaccio, as well as an examination of other writers who praise or deride the heroic deeds of women, see: Benson 1-31. Interestingly enough, Boccaccio excludes saints and martyrs from his catalogue of exceptional women. See also Constance Jordan, "Boccaccio's In-Famous Women: Gender and Civic Virtue in the De mulieribus claris," Ambiguous Realities Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, eds., Carole Levin and Jeanie Watson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987) 25-47.
hate is transformed into love, pain into ecstasy, death into eternal life and, according to many male ecclesiastics, female is transformed into male.\footnote{147}{Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, \textit{A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity} (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) 152.} How better to exemplify this than to use the "lesser" body of a woman to illustrate that the last shall be first in the next life? "According to Christ and to Paul, the first shall be last and the meek shall inherit the earth. Thus, not only did devotional writers mix gender images in describing actual men and women; they also used female images to attribute an inferiority that would - exactly because it was inferior - be made superior by God."\footnote{148}{Walker Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation} 109.} The Gospel of Thomas, too, assures the female believer that "every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."\footnote{149}{Elizabeth Castelli, "'I Will Make Mary Male..." 30.} In some saint's lives, this is made overtly clear. For example, prior to her battle in the arena, the Christian convert Perpetua dreamed she was changed into a male warrior. As Margaret Miles has stated: "Perpetua's body could represent 'male' heroism...even while it remained an object for the male gaze."\footnote{150}{Margaret Miles 61.} Gender transgression in combination with sexual violence was a repetitive component deeply embedded in legends of female saints.\footnote{151}{Yavneh 153.}

For viewers familiar with the "becoming male" tradition, their immediate perception might be that Saint Agatha is doing just that and, hence, becoming more spiritually perfect. It would then follow that she is an exception to general classifications of women as inferior, imperfect, and lust-ridden, an exemplar from a past time with little in common with contemporary women, hence her physical strength and courage poses no threat to the current state of affairs. In that distant past, such displays of Christian fortitude were crucial in view of the pagan threat, but hardly necessary to imitate on a
vast scale in the present expansion of "universal" Christendom (unless, as previously
mentioned, one takes the Turks into account).

It has been suggested that in times of spiritual crises, early Roman martyrs were
resuscitated as role models since the Church was built ideologically through their
example, and literally and physically on top of their broken bodies. At such a juncture,
the saint's body stands for the Christian community at large, as well as the Body of the
Church. Yet by the Renaissance, the early martyrs were exemplars to be admired more
than imitated, and many Protestant reformers would soon be discouraging over-
zealous worship of saints and encouraging the sanctity of matrimony for unmarried
women (as an alternative to the convent). Within such a climate, the example of a
woman's saintly heroism seems to lack credence as an acceptable role model, involving
as it does the willful rejection of the role of daughter, wife, or mother. Saint Agatha
answers only to the call of Christ. Transferred to the materially oriented and fully
Christianized Italian Renaissance world, her example, though a crucial factor in the
Christian past, must have seemed anachronistically excessive. However, if death seemed
extreme, empathy with Christ's bodily suffering was not, and affective piety stressing
physical emulation of his trials and tribulations flourished among pious women. His
body was a magnet for their devotion.

The "becoming male" idea may have been a hegemonic norm, but it was not without
contestation or resistance in the realm of practice. In contrast to "becoming male,"
notions of female religiosity, including mysticism, which flourish in women's writings of
the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, do not seem to have operated on such assumptions.
As Caroline Walker Bynum has suggested, women often had a tendency to relate their

152 Brigitte Cazelles, introduction, Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe, eds., Renate Blumenfeld-
own embodiment to the Incarnate God. His body bled, nourished, and hurt as did theirs, and there was a parallel drawn between women's experiences and the body of Christ. This often resulted in verbal images of a maternal and/or sexual nature, and frequently feminine metaphors were utilized for describing Jesus. Hence, women's focus was often on their suitability to emulate Christ, there being no need to become male. If the flesh was gendered feminine in Christian discourse, then women were better able to relate physically to Christ in their imitation of him. This explains why more women than men received the stigmata, had eucharistically inspired visions, let off sweet smells from their incorrupt corpses, etc. This kind of piety was also a way for women to bypass certain types of male-defined clerical power and to exercise their own agency, albeit within circumscribed limits. A strong identity as a Christian might have served (seemingly and temporarily) to imply the subordination of other markers such as gender and class, an empowering avenue for people occupying those subordinate positions which normally allowed little freedom of expression.

Statistics compiled by some authors show a rise in female sanctity between 1305 and 1500. There was an increase of women lay saints, who made up 55% of those canonized. According to Margaret King, "in no other period from the time of Christ until the eve of the Reformation did women weigh so greatly in the balance of sanctity." It is important to stress, as part of this sanctity, the continuing appeal of early Christian and medieval saints' lives. Renaissance parents would often give their daughters books such as Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, or accounts of the lives of Catherine of Siena,

---

154 Bynum, *Fragmentation* 82.
155 Bynum, *Fragmentation* 119-150.
156 Bynum, *Fragmentation* 135.
157 King 130.
Hildegard of Bingen, and Julian of Norwich. These were common gifts along with devotional guides or books of prayer.\textsuperscript{158} And it has been recently shown that women played a significant role as book owners, sellers, and readers.\textsuperscript{159}

Male and female body imagery pervades discussions of female religiosity in a number of different ways. Empathy with Christ's sufferings involving the dynamics of physical union took multifold forms. Christ had entered the bodies of early martyrs in order to sustain them so that the excruciating tortures never result in expressions of pain, but rather glowing countenances infused with blissful love. For contemporary religious women such a union could be likened to the heterosexual coupling of man and wife in the case of some women mystics (think of Catherine of Siena who, in a vision, was wedded to Christ with his foreskin as her ring), but what about in the case of a male saint, or in the case of Saint Agatha's gender transgressive body?\textsuperscript{160}

In Sebastiano's painting, Saint Agatha's body is imitating/fusing with the sometimes male/sometimes female body of Christ. The erotics of physical union with Christ for those familiar with metaphors describing Jesus as mother might imply, in some cases, desire for another "female" body. What about the possibility of a same-sex attraction? According to Patricia Simons: "Any woman daring enough to recognize her own sexual orientation outside the norm might also have surreptitiously enjoyed some images of sexual women produced for heterosexual men, 'cross-viewing' as it were."\textsuperscript{161} In addition to the divine fusion involved as a heavenly bride is wedded to the saviour, there is the

\textsuperscript{158} King 174. For a listing of religious publications in Italian which were in print at this time, see: Anne Jacobson Schutte, Printed Italian Vernacular Religious Books 1465-1550 A Finding List (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1983).
\textsuperscript{159} King 173.
\textsuperscript{160} For this episode in Catherine's life see: Bynum, "'...And Woman his Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," Gender and Religion 275.
\textsuperscript{161} Simons, "Lesbian (In)Visibility" 83.
possibility of a powerful sensual female body merging with Christ's now feminized body. The feminized body of Christ is evident in many medieval and contemporary writings. In a sermon of Guerric of Igny it is said: 'The Bridegroom [Christ]...has breasts, lest he should be lacking any one of all duties and titles of loving kindness.'

It seems that for the woman viewer of the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha, there are possibilities for identification that might offer more room, and hence be more empowering, than the impossible role model of the Virgin Mary. In Bynum's words, "devotion to the human Christ was a 'female' theme in a way devotion to Mary was not." A woman viewer versed in accounts of religious women's lives might be able to relate to the erotics of spiritualism in a way that escapes the bind of female flesh as sinful, as insatiable, as temptation itself. Indeed, women might comprehend a message about how female flesh approximates the saviour's own in the way that Saint Agatha has fused with the body of Christ. Implicit in the acknowledgment of an erotic fusion of the body of Agatha with the body of Christ, the union that will be perfected in death, is an identification with that other female body sexually engaged in earthly transcendence.

The virgin martyr does not seem to look directly at anyone or anything, but rather has the anaesthetized expression of saintly perserverence, her lips slightly parted to reveal the top row of her teeth. This is a transcendence that not only implies disregarding materiality and "becoming male," but also utilizing physicality by steering female bodily experience toward salvation.

Both modes of thought seem to inflect Sebastiano's painting - becoming male and experiencing God through female flesh. Agatha is "putting on Christ," through her pose and the loin cloth, the invincible male athlete Christ engaged in a spiritual contest (such

---

162 Guerric of Igny quoted in Gender and Religion 264.
163 Bynum, "...And Woman His Humanity" 259.
a Renaissance ideal. She is imitating him through martyrdom (every martyrdom in some way relates to the martyrdom - the nails, the knife), and bodily uniting with him in an erotically charged fusion. The erotics of this fusion depend not only on the sexual implications of mystic union, but also on the aesthetics of the Venetian nude fused with the Tuscan body, the Venetian nude as possessed both by the male gaze and now by Christ. To return to the words of Edward Lucie-Smith, is this "a far from holy ecstasy," or is it a holy ecstasy that is fundamentally expressed bodily and erotically?

The painting, containing references to the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, seems to fit well the criteria of the altarpiece, which is precisely to encourage meditation about the role of Christ in Christian history, and his continued presence in everyday life. Gender ambiguity gives those references a richer dimension - what, after all, are the gendered implications of Salvation? The channel(s) through which this worship might flow - desire for female nudity, appreciation of anatomical skill, the erotics of spiritual union, or all three - is more difficult to determine. Nevertheless, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha could not have been an efficacious devotional image.

As we have seen, such devotion could envision Christ as male and/or female, and the relation of the viewer to that body, imprinted over Saint Agatha's own, could involve a kind of subjective gymnastics. What in the Renaissance allows for this fluidity of sexed subject positions, this movement in and out of diverse sexual identifications? Certainly Sebastiano's fusion of body types blurs gender distinctions. Yet there is an additional dimension to this gender troping still to be addressed.
Chapter 6
Disruptive Bodies:
The Androgyne and the Hermaphrodite

...if the Renaissance hermaphrodite suggests that categorical fixity is inevitably unstable...he/she equally embodies the fact that there was no absolute categorical fixity to begin with.

-Jones and Stallybrass\textsuperscript{164}

...the union of masculine and feminine traits in one individual evoked fantasies of an intensified or extended eroticism, bisexual and at times indiscriminate or licentious. At the same time, an equally long literary and artistic tradition saw this fusion of opposites within one being as an archetype of desexualized self-containment, a fantasy offering release from the ceaseless and conflict-ridden striving of all mortal flesh toward carnal or spiritual union with another mortal.

-James Saslow\textsuperscript{165}

Drawing a conclusion from various parts of this essay thus far, there is yet another complication at work in Saint Agatha's gender undecidability. At this time, it is necessary to take up the problematic of the androgyne and the hermaphrodite. Although some authors use the two terms as synonymous, it is important to distinguish between their different trajectories, and how these traverse Renaissance bodies. In the intellectual elitism of the cinquecento, classical formulations of these two categories usually made the distinction that the androgyne was a union of masculine and feminine body types, and the hermaphrodite was a physiognomical state combining male and female genitalia.\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{164}Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, "Fetishizing Gender: Constructing the Hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe," \textit{Body Guards} 105.
\textsuperscript{165}Saslow 85.
\textsuperscript{166}Weil 9-10.
In the view of some scholars, the hermaphrodite would seem to be the least stable of
the two terms, blurring any constructed male-female separation, and initiating a conflict-
ridden power struggle. The androgyne is then considered a less disruptive state
encompassing a myth of originary unity.\textsuperscript{167} This originary unity could be articulated in
antique mythological (Ovidian), antique philosophical (Platonic) or Christian
(prelapsarian) terms.\textsuperscript{168}

However, in the conflation of pagan, humanist, and Christian belief systems which
characterizes Italian elite society of the late quattrocento and early cinquecento, the
assimilation and refiguring of the categories male and female cannot be viewed as
straightforward, or indeed as distinct categories at all.

The notion, so powerful after the eighteenth century, that there had to be
something outside, inside, and throughout the body which defines male as
opposed to female and which provides the foundation for an attraction of
opposites is entirely absent from classical or Renaissance medicine.\textsuperscript{169}

Hence, previous to the development of sex as an ontological category in the eighteenth
century, the primary structure for the human body was male, what Thomas Laqueur calls
the "one-sex model."\textsuperscript{170} It other words, it might seem that social roles for women were
"naturalized" by Renaissance science and medicine as rooted in nature, suggesting that
there was always an accompanying danger that while heroic women were coming closer
to perfection (men), they were simultaneously going against some pre-cultural essence,
and hence were unnatural or grotesque.

\textsuperscript{167}Saslow, \textit{Ganymede} 224 (footnote 53).
\textsuperscript{168}Constance Jordan, \textit{Renaissance Feminism Literary Texts and Political Models} (Ithaca and London:
\textsuperscript{169}Laqueur 22.
\textsuperscript{170}Laqueur 25.
However, an examination of medical discourses of the time, both Galenic and Aristotelian, indicates that the Renaissance had no stable basis on which to categorize gender difference. In an insightful essay by Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, it is asserted that "... in the Renaissance there was no privileged discourse (as biology was to become in the nineteenth century) that could even claim to establish a definitive method by which one distinguished male from female."171 There was a widely held belief that the male and female genitals were identical, but the woman's penis was on the inside, the negative shape of the male external member.172 What Jones and Stallybrass make clear is that there was conflict and instability in the Renaissance production of gender; the male hierarchical position had to be constantly rearticulated, but could never, finally, be secured.

In a culture in which female and male behavioral characteristics were, in Aristotelian scientific discourse, tenuously considered the result of a difference rooted in nature (a socially not biologically determined given), and in Christian discourse the result of a divinely ordained hierarchy, a fusion of male and female body types - as in Sebastian's the Martyrdom of Saint Agatha - is going to bring with it an accompanying notion of a fusion of male and female socially prescribed roles, given that any distinction between sex and gender difference is tenuous at best. Yet within this system, the female still mirrors the male; she defines him. She is his inverse, an "imperfect" model. If, as in Galenic terms, a female is a male with the genitals turned inside, then she exhibits a void, a lack, a receptacle. Value judgments based on female "inferiority" as compared to this male measure were codified by both classical mythology and the Church.

171 Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, "Fetishizing Gender" 80.
172 Laqueur, see especially Chapter 2 "Destiny is Anatomy" 25-62.
The categories of the androgyne and the hermaphrodite provided proof of the failure of impermeable distinctions. Although James Saslow has provided a very useful account of Ganymede in the Renaissance, his vacillation regarding the potential differences between the androgyne and the hermaphrodite causes a problem in his analysis, as does his lack of clarity regarding the androgyne. This is evident in the following two statements made on the same page of his chapter on Giulio Romano:

The androgyne . . . represented the ultimate alchemical goal of fusion of opposites, the sexually ambiguous product of the coniunctio of masculine and feminine substances or forces.

and

. . . the androgynous perfected male is triumphant over the earthbound, imperfect female.  

It is the male that benefits from the fusion referred to, and it is the female that loses out. The "sexually ambiguous product" still somehow retains its maleness.

Saslow is uncritically reproducing precisely the bias the Renaissance instilled in androgyny. While acknowledging the fact that Renaissance homosexual impulses are implicated in misogyny, Saslow does not mention that androgyny is implicated in misogyny precisely to the degree that the male portion of the androgyne remains superior in the equation. This type of practice can, in Luce Irigaray's words: "reduce all others to the economy of the Same . . . [through] its power to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self-representative of a 'masculine subject.' " The predominant Renaissance view of androgyny, relating as it does to Plato's body/soul dualism, is undeniably hierarchical, privileging the male term. Actually, it might be

---

173 Saslow, Ganymede 125.
174 Irigaray quoted in Weil (Irigaray's original emphasis), 21.
more appropriate to say, again following Irigaray, that the philosophy of Plato, his theory of Form, attempts to erase the material foundation of life, the feminine-maternal, from the equation completely, giving the generative powers to a male lineage of creativity which is superior to the sensate (female) world of physical things; it is the male who has transcendent power to approach the world of Knowledge and Pure Essence.  

That might be the predominant philosophical view, but what about the place accorded androgyny was in art? How do such codes relate to visual imagery? Eroticism was for many artists "a central aesthetic impulse" and a point of visual interest no matter what the supposed content of the work.  

There is a great deal of symbolic and iconographic exchange occurring as artists transpose ideas from sacred to secular themes and subject matter and vice versa. This type of fluidity, which is evident, for example, in Sebastiano del Piombo's "advice" to Michelangelo in 1533 to give the catamite Ganymede a halo and make of him a John the Baptist, is precisely the type of flexibility which would

175 For a summary of Irigaray's interrogations of male philosophy, see: Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray Philosophy in the Feminine (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), especially Chapter 5 "The Same, the Semblance, and the Other" 101-122. There have been valid criticisms of Irigaray's essentializing of female motherhood and reinscribing of compulsory heterosexuality, including that by Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics (New York: Methuen, 1985) 139.

176 Saslow Ganymede 140

177 Saslow, Ganymede 42. Ganymede was the homoerotic cynosure of the High Renaissance (although of course the debate is open whether or not it is advantageous even to apply the term homoerotic to this historical period). Suffice it to say that the trope of Jupiter's abduction of Ganymede appealed to patrons who, although not defined by a sexual identity, nevertheless took an interest in a set of sexual behaviors that might today be defined as homosexual, bisexual, or of a pedophilic nature but which, in the Renaissance, would all fall under the homogenizing rubric of sodomitic practices. The NeoPlatonic court of the Medici family revived the dynamics of man-boy relationships, at the very least within a literary and learned context. There are many examples of Renaissance anal erotics: cupids or adolescent boys with their bare buttocks turned toward the viewer (Parmagianino's Cupid Carving His Bow, for example, or Correggio's Ganymede). For legal definitions of sodomy in the Renaissance, see: Ruggiero, The Boundaries of Eros. See also Margaret Hunt's afterword in Queering the Renaissance. "Acceptable desire had a markedly different social location in the Renaissance than it does today, in Valerie Traub's words, 'flow[ing] rather freely between homoerotic and heterosexual modes.' It was a setting in which it was taken for granted that religious devotion had a strongly erotic component, and where deep emotional bonds between men (at least the right sorts of men), including physical displays of affection, sleeping in the same bed, etc., were esteemed rather than disparaged" 359-360.
propel Counter-Reformation attempts to draw strict divisions between erotic and spiritual imperatives, and to render certain subject matter vulnerable to censorship. It is also evidence of the conceptual leaps viewers could be expected to make when faced with striking visual parallels between pagan and Christian characters given their knowledge of the sexual or chaste identities associated with them.

Pietro Aretino in his praise of a figure by Sebastiano:

stresses the figure's androgynous combination of physical attributes . . . Aretino deems the ambiguity suitable for a figure that can incite lust in and toward both genders: 'Because this goddess infuses her qualities into the desires of both sexes, the skillful artist has made her with the body of a woman and the muscles of a man. Thus she is stirred by both masculine and feminine feelings.'

Sebastiano del Piombo uses this strategy for Saint Agatha as well. There are those theorists who would disagree with Aretino's form of praise. Interestingly, Dolce's fictional Aretino has this to say in the Dialogo della pittura, first published in Venice in 1557:

If we are realizing a nude figure . . . we can present it either as heavily musculated, or as delicate . . . if the painter has to depict Samson, he should not attribute to him the softness and delicacy of Ganymede; nor, conversely, if he has to paint Ganymede, should he seek out in this case the sinews and robustness of Samson . . . He should similarly keep to what is proper in the case of a woman, distinguishing one sex from another . . . One should also take care to avoid disharmony within one and the same body: that is, one should not make one section of the body corpulent and the other thin, or one muscular and the other delicate.

178 Saslow Ganymede 78. Saslow says Aretino is praising a Venus, which is odd considering the few examples of mythological subjects by the hand of Sebastiano del Piombo. Whether this painting is lost or the figure in it misidentified as a Venus is unknown to me.

179 Roskill 141.
This might have been Dolce's literary opinion, but there are many works of art that do not adhere to this advice, from Raphael's portraits of young men to Leonardo's John the Baptist (1515). Androgyny was provocative. A number of authors have discussed love and androgyny in the context of NeoPlatonism. Some Neoplatonists espoused that a merging of male and female traits in adolescence yields the most universal and ideally beautiful nude figure. A philosophic foil was thus extended to facilitate erotic interests. While androgyny might have signalled, especially within NeoPlatonic circles, a special kind of transcendent erotically superior beauty, it is nevertheless the case that "Absolute beauty...is founded on the repression of difference and its assimilation to the same: the conversion of female to male, and flesh to spirit." Androgyny was an erotic trope that might have proposed a superior male body, but artists could not control visual responses to it. The idea of androgyny, when visually manifested, will be a site of struggle between types and terms, providing much ammunition for debates on the worth and value of each of the sexes, physically, erotically and spiritually. There is a conflict between Christian claims of spiritual equality (for example the injunction in Galatians 3:28 that 'there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus'), which still manage to privilege the male as more perfect and the body as a virile vehicle for emulation of the Passion, and NeoPlatonism, which sought to undermine the value of the physical world of fleshly bodies (gendered female), privileging the intellect (gendered male). As one scholar


wryly intimated, "spiritual equality" does not automatically connote "worldly betterment."\(^{182}\)

There is a further complication at work. What about the relation of hermaphroditism to androgyne? It has been suggested to me that to the right of the knotted bulk, or genital knot, of Saint Agatha's loin cloth, is a fold that resembles a "clitoral hood," and that there is an outward suggestion of both male and female genitalia.\(^{183}\) While there is a developed visual tradition for the loin cloth/genitals of Christ, here appropriated for a new context, there is not, as far as I know, a corresponding visual tradition of depicting female genitalia, until the Loves of the Gods print series by Gian Jacopo Caraglio, published in Rome between 1524 and 1527.\(^{184}\) And while I resist the suggestion, it does call up an interesting point about the relationship between the androgyne (fusion of bodily types that is apparent in Saint Agatha's musculature and Venetian nudity) and the hermaphrodite (the implied coexistence of both male and female genitalia which is present whether or not there is a clitoral hood alluded to - we suspect, after all, that Agatha has female genitals underneath the loin cloth). There is surely here, an irresolvable tension between those notions which makes the painting even more enigmatic. The very categories of male and female are themselves called into question, pushing the limits of, and exposing, the instability of any "naturalizing" systems which purport to contain them.

\(^{182}\) Averil Cameron, 'Neither Male Nor Female,' *Greece and Rome* 27.1 (April 1980) 64.

\(^{183}\) This was a term used by Marc Pessin of the University of British Columbia, who brought it to my attention during my roundtable presentation.

\(^{184}\) The series of erotic prints *I Modi*, which caused such a scandal in Rome in the 1520s, for all its candor, does not actually display female genitals. See: Lawner, *I Modi*, op. cit. Illustrations of hermaphrodites as other than objects of curiosity, but rather as bodies for medical inquiry and scientific classification, do not appear until the late sixteenth century. See: Julia Epstein, "Either/Or - Neither/Both: Sexual Ambiguity and the Ideology of Gender," *Genders* 7 (Spring 1990): 107-111.
To examine the figure of the androgyne...is to discern the absent presence of another figure, that of the hermaphrodite, haunting the ideal of androgyny and its ordered, symmetrical opposition of male and female with the notion of an original confusion or chaos of sexes and desires. To bring this other figure into the scene of representation, is to subvert the text's structure of opposition and its use as a paradigm for the creation of meaning and hierarchy. It is to dislodge the androgyne and the sexual, aesthetic, and racial hierarchies it establishes from the universal, revealing its givens to be constructions of patriarchal ideology and not the results of divine or natural law.\textsuperscript{185}

Ambiguous genitalia contests social norms that propound clear-cut sexual difference and reject the possibility of new categories.\textsuperscript{186} Anatomical doubleness or genital pluralism makes it clear that the link between morphology and gender is not a given, that gender has been \emph{produced}, and that the production of gender is an unstable act. Androgyny and hermaphroditism neither erase nor fix difference but rather problematize it by transgressing the boundaries of the idealized classical body with a disruptive body which resists categorization.\textsuperscript{187} To call up the hermaphrodite is always to raise, in some form or another, the possibility of homosexuality, the possibility of configurations of interest and pleasure other than heterosexual. Jonathan Goldberg has said ". . . it is the woman with a strap-on [in this case a loin cloth] who can, from a hetero perspective, be understood as attempting to usurp male prerogatives - who can most easily call up the

\textsuperscript{185}Weil 11.
\textsuperscript{186}Epstein 101.
\textsuperscript{187}The body within the classical aesthetic is idealized and self-contained; it obeys a canon of proportions. The grotesque body, capable of turning the hegemonic world order upside down, is about orifices, and bodily functions. It excretes fluids and gives birth; it transgresses boundaries. It was Mikhail Bakhtin who first examined the classical and grotesque bodies in the context of the carnivalesque. See: Mikhail Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968).
This potential for sexual multiplicity has remained an unacknowledged factor in accounts of the painting, or if acknowledged, presumably avoided due to the likelihood of its irritation of any cohesive and wholesome explanation.

In this essay, I have tried to ascertain how these seemingly abstract notions are visually at work in Sebastiano del Piombo's painting, and how male and female viewers might have understood the gender ambiguity that is so clearly a part of the artist's programme - consciously or unconsciously. A major question remains. If this ambiguity signalled something different depending on the sexed and gendered positions of the viewers confronting it, does the painting indeed reveal a "chaos of sexes and desires?"

---

188 Goldberg, Queering the Renaissance 8-9.
Gender ambiguity does more than merely turn the world upside down, a gesture that, after all, fundamentally maintains the notion of hierarchy even when it reverses it. Sexual ambiguity threatens the possibility of gender contrariety as the basis for social order and thereby threatens the hegemony of heterosexuality. Its history demonstrates that this threat has been met with the heaviest artillery available to the professional discourses of medicine and jurisprudence that establish human definitions and boundaries.

-Julia Epstein

The purpose of this project has been to open up avenues for multiple and conflicting ways of reading the image within the socially encoded structures of early sixteenth-century viewership. I have asked questions of this painting that have not previously been considered. By clearing a space for conflicting readings - those readings erased by interpretive exercises that seek to create coherent art historical categories or definitive explanations - I have facilitated another space from which to recognize the social categories of the early sixteenth century which, in the painting, are called into question in a moment of slippage or destabilization.

Judith Butler has written that the pleasure produced by the instability of categories sustains the erotic practices of those for whom the categories were intended. While it is true that there is pleasure in the confusion of boundaries, we cannot assume that there was no pleasure produced for anyone except the patron and those who had viewing interests similar to his, or that there was no substantial place in the Renaissance for the

\[189\] Epstein 130.

enactment of women's viewing pleasures. We cannot conclude that this painting is simply a projection of male anxiety over strong autonomous women and hence has no value for a female viewer. It is crucial to allow avenues of agency for women, as well as allowing the possibility for readings of same-sex desire.

Viewers do appropriate social codes and refigure them to fit their own social experiences; "...even when there is no hint of an alternative ideology to counter a dominant one, subordinate and dominant individuals will experience the accepted ideology in different ways."191 The intricacies of viewing pleasure in the early sixteenth century depended on an ability to recognize and sort through familiar signs and stereotypes from both visual and textual experience, and to come to terms with discovered tensions. This is a highly mediated process. The most art historians can do is reconstitute the social climate in which this mediated process occurred. Viewing experiences, although subject to certain conventions which depend on the genre, site, and context, are not easily predictable. In any attempt to construct audience expectations it is crucial to recognize that artistic genres will delimit certain boundaries, but meaning can never be "fixed." Categories of viewing are not autonomous, but overlap. In this sense potential meanings circulate is in "undecidability rather than closure."192

The disruption of boundaries signalled by Saint Agatha's gender ambiguity is especially relevant for those groups which have been marginalized and defined as, or having existed as, outside normative social limits. By its very depiction in such ambiguous terms, Saint Agatha's body generates possibilities for a multiplicity of readings within the terms being offered - a delineation, rather than a chaos, of desires. Does it reassert male-female difference within a binary equation, or does it unsettle it along a

192 Turner 51.
sliding hermeneutical scale? Categories of active/passive are mixed and muddied, in large part due to the problematics of the subject itself - a heroic female martyr. Sebastiano articulates and exposes the limitations of his society's discourses regarding sex and gender differences by bringing them to bear on the specific topic of a female martyrdom.

If martyrdom is indeed "the apex of Christian heroism,"193 where is Saint Agatha situated? One scholar has claimed, "once a sexual dimension is acknowledged for the female character, her identity as a legitimate, active heroine is simply not possible."194 Yet is the painting really so straightforward as to fit that limiting criteria? Would it not depend on what kind of sexual dimension(s) is being acknowledged? Theoretically active, according to theological doctrine, does Saint Agatha nevertheless exhibit a "subordinate heroism,"195 in which she remains secondary to the real hero written across her body - Christ himself? Is the obstacle to Saint Agatha's being a true hero her own female body? Is her oneness with God achieved at the cost of self-obliteration or "ecstatic self-dissolution?"196 My point has been to raise these questions, not resolve them; it is their dynamic open-endedness that permits optimism for the recovery of viewer agency.

Saint Agatha's martyrdom involves a dynamic of power and powerlessness, but in the final analysis who has the power and who does not remains unclear. There is the power of the heroic muscular body and its active fortification via Christ, the power of the autonomous woman outside of dominant social structures of marriage and motherhood,

194 Elena Ciletti, "Patriarchal Ideology..." 52.
196 A term borrowed from Dean 154.
the power of the chaste female body able to resist sexual assault, and the power of the victim to propel desire/event, the potential spiritual and erotic power of suffering which is dependent on the sadomasochism at the heart of Catholic martyrdom. There is the powerlessness of the displayed Venetian nude to remain unsurveyed by the domineering male gaze, enacted voyeuristically not only by the male viewer, but by the several pairs of male eyes within the painting, the powerlessness of Saint Agatha to act autonomously without submitting to a higher male authority, namely God and his Law (but also earthly patriarchy), and her powerlessness to survive the wounds caused by torture, resulting in her earthly death, here forever forestalled by Sebastiano's depiction of the instant before the punishment commences.

If Saint Agatha's weakness is somehow strength, if her lack of earthly authority is somehow an expression of spiritual power, her heroic martyrdom is nevertheless paradoxically, "this doing which is yet no action,"\(^{197}\) part of the unresolved tension providing much of the picture's unsettling interest. Stephen Greenblatt has explained that Shakespearean theatre draws out erotic power, develops it, and returns it with interest to the audience.\(^{198}\) I would qualify this point of view by saying that the audience response in turn inflects upon those very artistic categories through which eroticism is expressed. I think the same is true of eroticism in Renaissance images, in the sense that uncertainty and ambiguity can be powerful stimuli generating additional narrative interest and appeal; this is the kind of appeal which must be recovered and discussed.

\(^{197}\)I appropriate this expression from Friedrich Hebbel (as translated and quoted by Mary Jacobus), who applied it to another Christian hero - Judith, slayer of Holofernes. I think it has applicability to the painted Agatha's paradoxical position. Mary Jacobus, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 119.

This project is part of my ongoing endeavour to reassess early modern visual representation in terms of issues of sexuality in gender. By utilizing recent feminist and queer theory, I have begun accessing the yet to be written history of Renaissance modes of eroticism. What I have sought to reveal about Sebastiano del Piombo's *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha* is the myriad channels it allows for the fluidity of sex, gender, and body categories, and the overlapping and conflicted voices with which it speaks Desire.
87

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Enciclopedia Cattolica 1 (1948).


Figure 1. Sebastiano del Piombo, The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha. 1520. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.
Figure 2. Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus*. 1510.
Gemaldegalerie, Dresden.
Figure 3. Titian, *Venus of Urbino*. 1538. Uffizi, Florence.
Figure 4. Sebastiano del Piombo, *The Death of Adonis*. 1513. Uffizi, Florence.
Figure 5. Woodcut from the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili. 1499.
Figure 6. Sebastiano del Piombo, *Holy Family with St. Catherine, St. Sebastian and Donor*. c. 1505-1530.
Louvre, Paris (detail).
Figure 7. Antonello da Messina, St. Sebastian. 1475. Gemaldegalerie, Dresden.
Figure 8. Sebastiano del Piombo, Flagellation. 1524. Fresco, Borgherini Chapel of S. Pietro in Montorio.
Figure 9. Michelangelo, Christ at the Column. Drawing, British Museum, London.
Figure 10. Sebastiano del Piombo, Study for The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha. Louvre, Paris.
Figure 11. Michelangelo, Libyan Sibyl. Sistine Ceiling, Rome.
Figure 12. Leda and the Swan. Engraving after Michelangelo's lost original (by Cornelis Bos). British Museum, London.
Figure 13. Michelangelo, Resurrected Christ. Drawing, Royal Library, Windsor.
Figure 14. Raphael, *Galatea*. 1513. Fresco, Villa Farnesina, Rome.
Figure 16. Swiss School, The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha. 1473.
Figure 17. Stradanus, *The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*. Engraving, 16th Century.
Figure 18. Cosimo Tura, *Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels*. 1474.
Figure 19. Lucas Cranach, *Christ on the Cross*. 1503.
Figure 20. Giovanni Bellini, *Dead Christ Supported by Two Putti*. Early 1450s.
Figure 21. Maerten van Heemskerck, *Man of Sorrows*. 1525.
Figure 22. Sebastiano del Piombo. The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha (detail).
Figure 23. Cologne Master, *Altarpiece with Cycle of the Life of Christ*, central panel: *Arma Christi*. c. 1340-1370.
Figure 24. Daniel Mauch, Buxheim Altar, outer panel: *Arma Christi with the Five Wounds*. c. 1500.
Figure 25. Goswyn van der Weyden, Triptych of Antonius Tsgrooten. c. 1507.
Figure 27. Master of the Tucher Altarpiece, *The Circumcision*. c. 1450.