

Queering the Picture: Reading Quirizio da Murano's Altarpiece of the *Saviour*

by

Marla Stevenson  
B. A., University of Victoria, 2003

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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MASTER OF ARTS

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**External Examiner****ABSTRACT**

The wound that Jesus received from a spear during the Crucifixion appears in a new way in Northern Italian art of the late trecento. My research tracks some key changes to this symbol's meaning during its migration through different religious and gender contexts, in communities of Franciscan and Dominican friars and nuns between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. I focus especially on a Venetian altarpiece showing Jesus offering his wound to a Poor Clare. My analysis of this altarpiece examines ideas of religious, social and gendered identity in relation to the iconography of Jesus' wound.

Scholars in early-modern gender studies point to existing tensions between visibility and invisibility, possibility and impossibility, which arise in relation to the signifying power of the female body in a male-oriented heterosexist system. As such, the scholarly literature often avoids addressing female homoerotic desire and the possibility of same-sex sexual expression in these kinds of religious images. My work indicates that the emotional and bodily expression of religious women was visible, as are representations of female homoerotic desire, if we can look beyond a binary system of gender and heterosexism.

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## **Introduction: Queering the Picture: Reading Quirizio da Murano's Altarpiece of the *Saviour***

This thesis investigates an intriguing altarpiece referred to here simply as the *Saviour*, which was created by Quirizio da Murano during the late-fifteenth century for a Clarissan house on Murano, near Venice (fig. 1). When I first read Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* as an undergraduate student I was attracted by the fact that in the painting the upper-body wound is situated on Jesus' breast. Indeed, Bynum describes Jesus' wound as "high up" on his chest where his nipple would be. As Bynum states,

Quirizio...shows a young, to our eyes somewhat feminine, and very beautiful Christ displaying the wound in his right side, located high up, where a nipple would be. He lifts up and offers the wound with two fingers of his left hand, just as the Virgin offers her breast to the infant Christ in hundreds of medieval paintings. With his right hand he gives the host to a kneeling nun.<sup>1</sup>

It was the ambiguous position of the wound that drew me in: what did this detail mean to late-medieval believers? As Jesus' upper-body wound is almost always described by scholars as a *side* wound, it is curious that from the earliest visual representations, the wound appears to move, traveling through a variety of locations on the upper, right front of the body, including his breast.

To understand better the complex nature of the imagery in the altarpiece, and prepare for the extended reading that follows, I offer the following description, which will highlight two key components of the work: first, the image of the wound itself and

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<sup>1</sup> C. Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1987, pp. 271-72, Plate 25. The author states that the image "evokes the mother Jesus so popular in devotional literature", and explains that the painting also relates iconographically to the eucharistic Man of Sorrows.

second, an important textual layer, the inscription in the painting that refers to the Song of Songs. The *Saviour* depicts a full-length image of an alive but crucified Jesus who gazes down from a large, centrally placed throne toward a woman clothed in black who kneels near his right foot. Jesus' bowed head and downward glance communicate a sense of sorrow as well as compassionate understanding. Similar to the poignancy of Mary's gaze in pre-modern Venetian representations of the Madonna, the intimacy of Jesus' gesture and gaze in the *Saviour* is emotionally and psychologically compelling. The size and placement of the throne in the *Saviour* seem to make Jesus accessible to the viewer. Jesus' nearness is also emphasized by his large size, an effect that would be increased by the relation of the image to the frame. At the same time the low viewpoint in the hilly landscape behind the throne makes him appear more distant. There is a sense of his rising in the picture—almost of floating out of the landscape.

The viewer's eye is directed inward toward the prominent wound on Jesus' breast by the suggested summit of a faraway hill, which is inferred to culminate exactly behind the wound. The wound is shown in a horizontal position related to the mandorla-shaped opening or tear in Jesus' gown, within which it is framed. The tip of the index finger of Jesus' slender left hand rests on the upper lip of the wound, while the end of his third finger appears to gently press a soft area of flesh around the wound's lower edge (fig. 2).

Two angels appearing above and to either side of Jesus hold banners, which carry the following text:

VENITE VOS AMICI MEI A ME TANTUM DILECTI CARNEM MEAM COMEDITE  
 VENITE DILECTISSIMI MEI IN CELLULAM VINARIAM SANGUINEQUE MEO INEBRIATE VOS

Bynum notes that this inscription, taken from the biblical poem the Song of Songs, translates as, “Come to me, dearly beloved friends, and eat my flesh” as well as “Come to me, most beloved, in the cellar of wine and inebriate yourself with my blood”.<sup>2</sup> At the bottom right corner of the *Saviour*, partially hidden by the throne, the figure of a bird in profile can just be discerned. Further visual inspection and research reveal that the bird is perhaps intended to represent the turtledove, an image, which may also refer to the Song of Songs, from the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> The significance of the Song of Songs for this altarpiece will be explored in this thesis.

Once I had been drawn towards this symbol on the move, to help me make sense of this phenomenon, I had to consider appropriate methodological approaches. By relying on gender studies as well as cultural and art history, such as the work of Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, the following inquiry into the origins and movement of the iconographic detail of the wound in the *Saviour* will suggest that a symbol’s meaning is mutable and capable of alteration, depending on specific cultural contexts and the viewing communities it served.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as I will demonstrate, the inscriptions found on the altarpiece in the image are an additional layer that ‘troubles’ (to borrow an important phrase from Judith Butler) our understanding of the meaning of the wound in the devotions of pre-modern religious women in Venice.

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<sup>2</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 272. [The text could also be read, “Come those of you who are my friends and eat my flesh with great delight” and “Come to me, most high lovers, to the cellar of the vineyard and inebriate yourself with my blood”.]

<sup>3</sup>According to contemporary monk Michael Casey, in Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, like the turtledove grieving for its homeland, the human soul continues to suffer from the desires of the physical body unless she receives communion, M. Casey, *Thirst For God*, Kalamazoo, 1988, p. 214.

<sup>4</sup>K. Ashley and P. Sheingorn, ed. *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Medieval Society*, Athens and London, 1990. In *Interpreting Cultural Symbols*, Ashley and Sheingorn explore the ways that in different periods, different readings of symbols assume cultural dominance, and what is repressed or silenced at one time may be expressed in another.

During the last twenty years, the altarpiece has been the focus of academic discussion, particularly because the way Jesus displays the wound disrupts conventions of heterosexuality. To most scholars the *Saviour* presents Jesus in a way that could be paralleled to the Virgin Mary offering her breast to her child or, the Christian community as a whole. However, as the following pages will reveal, such a limited reading of an image, which I find so evidently peculiar in an art-historical and heteronormative sense, excludes the possibility of gender-shifting in the figure of Jesus in Venice at the time the painting was created. As the reader will discover, the iconography of the wound in the *Saviour* and the imagery of unrequited desire in the Song of Songs establish the likelihood of female homoerotic desire in the lives of nuns at Santa Chiara on Murano.

I wanted a frame that addressed how to ‘read’ this image. In fact, only recently have art historians begun to explore what it means to ‘read’ images in ways that are not restricted to iconographical or textual analysis. It is clear that, as in literary or historical studies, an art historical reading is always an interpretation from a position—a story told from a particular vantage point.<sup>5</sup> In her book on reading medieval images, for instance, Elizabeth Sears affirms that to “read” a work is to subject it to close visual analysis with an awareness of the historical context and function of the object as well as artistic conventions. Furthermore, she points out that frequently the object of study is chosen because it allows the art historian to address concerns of a more universal importance, as might be the case with my reading of this altarpiece in light of what it can tell us about gendered positions of spectatorship. In this way images and objects in current art history

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<sup>5</sup>E. Sears, *Reading Medieval Images: the Art Historian and the Object*, ed. E. Sears and T. Thomas, Michigan, 2002, p. 2.

are perceived to reveal “multiple” readings that are not “mutually exclusive”, and what is chosen (one’s choice point) is equally important.<sup>6</sup>

Sears’ ideas offer a basic definition, a place to build one’s sense of the work needed. I found inspiration in the analytical framework offered by Michael Ann Holly, who talks about “historical imagination” and the “rhetoric of the image”. She argues, that while most art historians refuse to acknowledge it publicly, art history relies on the “gendered, ideological, and cultural situatedness” of scholars, as well as empirical investigation.<sup>7</sup> Because the scholar’s vantage point has been pre-established, everything is inclined to “fall into place” around the individual art historian’s “anchor of perception”. But, it is key to stress, as Holly explains, that analyzing an image from only one point of view does not use up what the image is able to say.<sup>8</sup>

I also found the work of Inge Wimmers to be most helpful. She discusses the central importance of frames of reference in her book on the ‘poetics’ of reading novels.<sup>9</sup> Along with the scholars just cited, Wimmers concurs that textual and cultural constraints do not mean there is only one correct reading. Complicated texts permit the employment of more than one critical method and can offer a number of forms of meaning. Wimmer’s notion of poetics focuses on the close relationship between the text and its reader. Texts set up systems of reference to guide both characters and readers.<sup>10</sup> Readers carry within themselves their awareness of cultural conventions and recollections of other texts, and it is this active process of reading that allows the reader to imaginatively

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<sup>6</sup>Sears, *Reading Medieval Images*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>7</sup>M. Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, Ithaca and London, 1996, pp. 66-67.

<sup>8</sup>Holly, *Past Looking*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>9</sup>I. Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading: Approaches to the Novel*, Princeton, 1988.

<sup>10</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. xviii.

engage with the words on the page. That is, readers are in a sense poets when they are reading.

Wimmers continues: when writing novels, authors “presuppose” a particular competence based on this earlier knowledge—the reader’s knowledge from ““outside”” the novel.<sup>11</sup> She uses the notion of ‘frames of reference’, which are activated by the reader’s particular bias or historical locale.<sup>12</sup> It is as if someone who reads novels is ensnared in a tangle of inter-locking frames of reference, some grounded in cultural conventions and others in textual approaches.<sup>13</sup> Little by little the referent appears through the act of reading by the text’s instruction and the reader’s enthusiastic cooperation. Wimmers states that it is only through a “retrospective, global reading of a text that the reader can locate the various systems of reference that make up the literary referent”.<sup>14</sup> In relation to feminist theory, for example, women can resist “culturally learned”, male-positioned reading conventions, and invent readings which are compatible with their own identity. “Like all critical stances, a ‘resisting’ reading is based on a construct and constitutes a frame of reference.” Therefore, the author emphasizes, that a “flexible poetics” of reading should provide for the additional complication and stress of conflicting frames of reference. The poetics Wimmers describes is not limited to approaches to the novel; since the idea of frames of reference is essential to most theories of reading, other approaches could be included without difficulty.<sup>15</sup> In particular I suggest that the idea of a flexible poetics of reading should be applied with regard to

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<sup>11</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. xvi.

<sup>12</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. xviii.

<sup>13</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. xix.

images like the *Saviour* in order to accommodate readings that are more inclusively gendered.

In a related essay on the subject of reading images, literary theorist Mieke Bal warns that when interpreting art, a major concern should be the issue of “framing”, of how we order our responses. Each act of reading occurs inside a socio-historical context or *frame*, which limits the meaning. Bal asserts that new ways of framing can even conceal earlier readings of the image. For instance, the author introduces an example of “blinding” that took place in the heteronormative reframing of a certain drawing by Toulouse-Lautrec, which was initially inspired by a female same-sex couple in bed yet this information was suppressed or ignored in later analyses of its content. As Bal states, this new frame rendered the “obviously lesbian overtones of the representation irrelevant, or better: invisible”.<sup>16</sup> Bal’s reading of “blindness” and invisibility offers a particularly relevant lesson: the ways interpreters frame objects or texts should not be underestimated.

Bearing viewers’ interpretations in mind, understanding how the wound symbol relates to the Song of Songs in an all-female religious setting is also crucial to grasping the altarpiece’s cultural meaning. Most importantly, it is clear that in certain contexts, when texts referred to in the altarpiece from the Song of Songs are examined, the text Bynum interprets as *flesh* in the *Saviour* also connotes *love* and *breasts*.<sup>17</sup> And, Richard Norris observes, that because most speakers assign the bride as the Song’s first speaker, the breasts so sensuously described can only belong to Jesus. In the Vulgate version of the Song, which was in use throughout Europe during the medieval period, Jesus’ *breasts*

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<sup>16</sup>M. Bal, “Reading Art?” *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, G. Pollock, ed., London and New York, 1996, pp. 25-41, pp. 26-28. Bal refers to *The Sleepers* executed in 1892 by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec.

<sup>17</sup>

are described by the longing female-gendered soul as “better than wine”. It seems significant too, as Norris notes, that in the beginning of the Song in Hebrew (and in modern English Bibles), the second line is interpreted “For your love is better than wine”. In the Vulgate, however, the same line is interpreted “For your breasts are better than wine”, giving it a more erotic connotation.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, as Norris explains, Gregory the Great also assumes an association between Jesus’ breasts and *flesh*.<sup>19</sup> When we realize that Gregory’s influence was still relevant in Venice during the late-fifteenth century, the similarity in meaning that Gregory perceives between *breasts* and *flesh* is important information with regard to the *Saviour*. Within the framework of the all-female environment for which the altarpiece was made, what Bynum reads from the inscription as *flesh* can also refer to *breasts*; in addition, what Bynum reads as *love* signifies *breasts*, which are more desirable than wine, making possible an encounter between a female beholder and a ‘feminine’ Jesus with sexy breasts.

With my methodological approach outlined above, I realized that a fuller historical context, with multiple frames of reference, was needed in order to understand gender, identity, desire, agency and the body in relation to the iconography of the wound in the *Saviour*. What follows is a brief overview of the intense development of the wound symbol, from the thirteenth century, in the Veneto and its surrounding regions, through to and including the *Saviour*. My examination of the origins of the iconographic detail of the wound in the *Saviour* altarpiece works to clarify the ways in which this symbol changes according to the specific needs of particular gendered contexts and the

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<sup>18</sup>R. Norris, ed. *Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, Grand Rapids and London, 2003, p. xvi.

<sup>19</sup>Norris, *Song of Songs Interpreted*, p. 28

communities it serves. The elasticity of the iconographic system, and its impact on how gender is visualized, is demonstrated here.

In Chapter One I will look at the ways the body of Jesus might be defined by an all-female community of religious believers in the late-medieval and early-modern period. To substantiate the idea of the separately gendered identity of religious women, we will also consider questions advanced by queer and feminist scholars regarding the mutability represented in pre-modern portrayals of gender and sex on the body of Jesus.

In Chapters Two and Three my research tracks some key changes to the connotations of the image of the wound during its migration through different religious and gender contexts, in particular within communities of Franciscan and Dominican friars and nuns between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, suggesting the mutability of the wound in the bodies of two males: Francis and Jesus.

My discussion of the imagery of the wound in the *Saviour* will explore these themes in relation to a particular material work, the altarpiece on Murano. From the foregoing it is clear that the painting arose from a variety of contextual conditions or frames that work to establish why such an image should not be unexpected. For instance, it is likely that the way Jesus offers the wound in the *Saviour* was meant to direct worshippers toward an affective, sensual interaction with Jesus, as was popular with other Franciscan imagery that represented Jesus' wounds during the late-fifteenth century, especially in Venice. Art historians like Rona Goffen provide some contemporary Venetian examples by Giovanni Bellini, which were intended for private devotion and emphasize the wounds of the alive but crucified Jesus in a similar way.<sup>20</sup> Sixteen

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<sup>20</sup>R. Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, New Haven and London, 1989.

Ringbom also states that images of Jesus showing his wounds became more popular as images of indulgence in Europe during the fifteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

An investigation of the wound in the *Saviour* examines the possible ways an emotional, sexually inclusive, gender-transcending Jesus is portrayed in the altarpiece. I emphasize that based on medieval models of unrequited courtly love, images like the *Saviour* unequivocally concern sex in that they are devices that were intended to arouse the sexual longing of the (chaste) beholder and direct it toward desire for Jesus. In this way, as Pearson suggests, such images served to support the nuns in their monastic vows of chastity within clausura.<sup>22</sup> It is also important to remember, as I will show, that such methods were meant to maintain the chastity of those nuns who were attracted to other nuns. Devotional religious strategies before and during the pre-modern period, such as the focus on self-knowledge (as preparation for confession and penitence), the image of the wound, or feelings of longing in the Song of Songs, assisted the spiritual seeker to concentrate instead on spiritual vision and bodily ecstasy with Jesus.

It is critical to note that representations of Jesus' bodily wound, as framed by a hole in his gown like in the *Saviour*, cannot be observed before the late trecento. This thesis will trace the evolution of the wound iconography so that we can understand the cultural transformations that preceded the making of the *Saviour* altarpiece and the impact on gendered subjectivities in religious works of art.

In Chapter Four, the tensions are described that existed between invisibility and visibility, significance and insignificance, as the process of clausura advanced in Venice. As we shall see, during the fifteenth century before enclosure laws were rigidly enforced,

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<sup>21</sup>S. Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, Abo: 1865, pp. 50-56.

<sup>22</sup>Pearson, *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art*, p. 154.

religious women—especially Franciscan nuns from Santa Chiara on Murano—were not only visible but were highly regarded by Church and city officials. During the sixteenth century, however, the evidence shows that Venetian nuns, in particular nuns from the convent of Santa Chiara increasingly drew more negative forms of attention from Church and secular authorities. The reduction in the status and influence of religious women in Venice after the fifteenth century is well documented by Kate Lowe in her study of the chronicle from the convent of Le Vergini. Under the new regime ushered in by the enforcement of observance in Venice, Lowe writes that religious female achievement was no longer valued. Women’s role in religion was reduced from “intelligent producers” to “passive” and “subservient” dependants.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Sperling effectively illustrates that reform was instrumental in the reduction of nuns’ autonomy in convent administration and decision-making power in Venice.<sup>24</sup> The *Saviour* is representative of religious women’s higher standing and distinctive identity in Venice before their prominence was decreased as a result of the expansion of the observant reform movement in the sixteenth century.

It seems likely that the way Jesus offers the wound in the *Saviour* arose from an earlier shift in the iconography of the wound. This change occurred around the end of the fourteenth century as a result of a campaign by religious reformers in and around Venice to promote Catherine of Siena’s experiences of the stigmata as well as other influential

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<sup>23</sup>K. Lowe, *Nun’s Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 89.

<sup>24</sup>J. Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, Chicago and London, 1999, pp. 170-178.

Dominican tertiaries' bodily religious expressions.<sup>25</sup> I propose that women's more conspicuous, affective participation in religion, which is evident in images and texts throughout the region during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, is reproduced again in the depiction of Jesus we see in the *Saviour* altarpiece.

Finally, I argue that particular innovative artistic developments, such as Jesus' downward gaze and the low horizon in the image, were introduced to religious art in order to stimulate an affective response, and the idea of seeing from the earthly world through to the spiritual world. In these ways the wound and the textual passages in the *Saviour* offered emotional and sensual solace for bodies gendered female that were enclosed in a Clarissan convent on Murano. An exploration of these concerns in the altarpiece will work to elucidate the importance of emotion and embodiment in the lives of religious women in pre-modern Venice.

Certain concepts referred to in the visual world of the altarpiece and the Poor Clares on Murano, as well as the Song of Songs and other texts from the period, demonstrate that, contrary to today's notions of Christian affectivity, the Church did not want to repress sexual feelings in religious devotion entirely. It is likely medieval and pre-modern religious authorities viewed the desires of the flesh as necessary, perhaps even advantageous when looking for fulfillment in the search for the divine. Fleshly desire can be aroused, then directed toward—and religious response actually increased—in a sensual relationship with Jesus.

I will be examining the ways in which spiritual vision and pre-modern artistic developments in Venice must be understood, so that we are able to look anew at the

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<sup>25</sup>C. Gilbert, "Tuscan Observants and Painters in Venice, ca. 1400" in *Interpretazioni Veneziane*, Ed., D. Rosand, Venezia, 1984, pp. 109-120, and G. Freuler, "Andrea di Bartolo, Fra tommaso d'Antonio Caffarini, and Siense Dominicans in Venice" in *Art Bulletin* v. 69 no. 4, 1987, pp. 570-586.

*Saviour* altarpiece. It seems clear that spiritual vision and concepts of interior perfection were important to women religious of the period. In addition, the artist's use of particular painterly strategies was meant to stimulate profound affective responses in the beholder. My analysis will show that like medieval conceptions of Jesus, female Franciscans likely thought of themselves as multi-gendered. At Santa Chiara on Murano the nuns also relied on awakening the body's fleshly yearnings, especially within the sphere of vision, moving them toward desire for an emotional and sensual fusion with a gender transcending and sexually inclusive Jesus. It is within this framework that the possibility of queering or 'troubling' Jesus' gesture in the *Saviour* and pre-modern religious women's erotic desires must be brought forward. Because of cultural renegotiations over gender, the terms of gender are continuously being re-conceived and reproduced, and it behooves us to undergo an imaginative re-evaluation of what potentially could be involved in a community of female religious in Venice, in their response to a material object in their built environment.

It is especially important to study women's experience of sexuality and the presence of emotion and embodiment in the construction of the pre-modern self, because the past can illuminate our understanding of the present by providing a radically different perspective on our current belief systems. In particular, the bodily expression in the religious practices of monastic women takes on a deeper, more nuanced meaning when we consider the multiple levels of the social, religious and cultural context behind images of the wound. (I should note that although I will not consider this topic here, a similar inquiry is also called for in relation to emotion and embodiment in the spiritual practices of men).

The work of Valerie Traub is crucial to my formulation. She takes an all-inclusive view of female homoeroticism that privileges a comprehensive understanding of diverse erotic potentials. She reminds us that, when possibilities of a female homoerotic past are denied, representations of female same-sex desire articulate an important tension—simultaneously conspicuous while at the same time remaining comfortably invisible to heteronormative culture. Her scholarship calls attention to the cultural difference and separation of ‘lesbians’.

It is worth considering her views on her considerations about using the term ‘lesbian’. She makes the important point that “to use the term ‘lesbian’ when discussing early modern texts is prematurely to unify concepts that only began to come into contact, jostle, and intersect late in the period...” Throughout Traub’s book, ‘lesbian’ refers to a representational image, a “rhetorical figure, a discursive effect”, rather than a “stable epistemological or historical” category.<sup>26</sup>

In concert with Traub, I find today’s tendency to unify diverse sexual experience under the rubric ‘lesbian’ epistemologically limiting. The author of this thesis identifies as queer or transgender because the term ‘lesbian’ does not accurately describe the way I experience sexual desire. To many people the term implies I am only attracted to women who identify as ‘lesbian’. To me ‘lesbian’ describes a form of social segregation, de-sexing and enforced celibacy of the female body, similar to that suffered by many early-modern religious women in Venice. For the purposes of this thesis, when no adequate term exists to describe what I prefer to call female homoerotic desire, female same-sex

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<sup>26</sup>V. Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, 2002, p. 15.

desire, or female-female desire, I use the word 'lesbian' within single quotation marks to signal my position.

In sum, I call on the reader to aspire to a more all-inclusive poetics of reading in relation to the altarpiece. As Wimmers suggests, with the complexity inherent in reading, it appears that a viable poetics should be broad enough to account for reading's active processing, its multiplicity of dimensions, focusing awareness on the diverse frames of reference, which we and past readers/viewers activate.<sup>27</sup> At the moment, the way Jesus' feminized body is portrayed in the painting continues to signify as a non-sexual body to many medievalists. In this way the altarpiece is a modern-day example of the misrepresentation of women's bodily expression in religion and the historical abnegation of female homoerotic desire. Each 'lesbian's' invisible personal history is multiplied by the cultural disaffirmation of the history of female homoeroticism. This is true of many forms of cultural representation but I am particularly interested in how 'reading' visual signs might be transformative, if one is prepared to trouble or queer what is being viewed.

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<sup>27</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. 21.

## Chapter One: Bodily Expressions of Female Religious and Female Same-Sex Desire in Late-Medieval and Early-Modern Studies

To understand the issues raised here in reading the *Saviour* altarpiece I need to review some of the perspectives advanced by queer and feminist academics about: firstly, how much of the scholarship interprets the fluidity seen in depictions of gender and sex on the humanized body of Jesus in the late-medieval/early-modern period; secondly, how one reads the connection between the body, identity and desire at this time in ways that allow for a wide and sometimes conflicting, range of affective and erotic desires, practices and affiliations.

Certain queer and feminist academics complain that medievalists almost never consider the feminized body of Jesus as *lover* to female mystics. Karma Lochrie, for instance, draws our attention to the fact that the prominent religious historian, Caroline Walker Bynum, excludes the possibility of queering Jesus' gesture and the female mystic's desire for his body.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, other critics emphasize that, though Bynum introduces the concept of cross-gender transformations in medieval religious responses, she fails to consider sexuality specifically as present "in the spectacle of a female worshiper contemplating a feminized Christ" with the possibility that same-sex desire might play into her response.<sup>2</sup> While Bynum admits that gender "mingling" amongst women who imitated Jesus was profound, the author refuses to relinquish the assumption that female mystics were aware only of what she describes as the 'maleness' of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup>K. Lochrie, "Mystical Acts and Queer Tendencies", in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, Minneapolis and London, pp. 180-200, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup>J. Goldberg, *Queering the Renaissance*, Durham and London, 1994, p. 2, (The author refers to R. Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*, Durham, N. C., 1998, and *Feminist Readings of Early-modern Culture: emerging subjects*. Edited by V. Traub, M. Kaplan, and D. Callaghan, Cambridge, 1996).

Therefore, it must be stated that, until now, the *Saviour* altarpiece has never been explored in an art-historical way that moves beyond the heterosexist bind. My approach is to explore specifically how contemporary audience response can be located within a broader understanding of the complexities of female homoerotic desire and religious longing in the late-medieval/early-modern period.<sup>3</sup>

As we have already established, images and objects can embody many meanings, which appeal to the disparate viewpoints and ingenuities of individual art historians. That is why, as Holly recognizes, in most poststructuralist writing on visual representation, an important concern is *who* we think is doing the looking.<sup>4</sup> Bal expands this concern, stating that it is relevant to realize not only *who*, but *which* social constituency is executing the reading.<sup>5</sup> Holly explains that the elements of an image are cumulative, with the definitive meaning transcending any of its specific aspects. Ultimately, however, the meaning always relies on the person who “orders” the act of interpretation.<sup>6</sup> The “rhetoric” of the painting plays with the work’s various “levels of revelation” and “catches its studious spectator up in the action”.<sup>7</sup> But because the images themselves hold a “stratigraphy” of rhetorical potential, at times historical readings of visual narratives disagree with each other.<sup>8</sup> It should also be said that differently gendered readings of images like the *Saviour* may vary depending on the particular gendered perspective of the viewer. Based on the vantage point and inventiveness of

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<sup>3</sup>It is worth pointing out here that many historians define the early-modern period as roughly 1500-1800.

<sup>4</sup>Holly, *Past Looking*, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup>Bal, “Reading Art?” p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Holly, *Past Looking*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup>Holly, *Past Looking*, pp. 162-63.

<sup>8</sup>Holly, *Past Looking*, p. 165.

their readers, allusions to female-female desire or mixing of genders in such artworks become more obvious or remain hidden out of sight.

It seems possible that a sense of unease might restrict many medieval scholars from failing to investigate the difference *desire* makes to the ways the gendered self is constructed. When Bynum insists that Jesus was “fully male in gender and sexuality, even to the involuntary movements of his penis”, she assumes that the inner desire stimulating such a pre-elective response operates only within a binary heterosexist model.<sup>9</sup> Still, we can consider the additional ways desire might be shaped and the self could be described as framed within the circumstances of a same-sex religious environment.

When writing about desire in female homosocial communities during the medieval period, for example, Lisa Weston demonstrates that the establishment of all-female monastic communities required a “radical redefinition” of self, which was dependant on the “reorganization and disciplining” of desire.<sup>10</sup> As Bynum asserts, all human beings *do* share the experience of our genitals and bodies in response to our physical desires. But, contrary to Bynum’s impression, it is clear that all human beings are not attracted to the same objects of desire, nor are they all aroused in response to the opposite gender or sexually opposite bodies, as the discussion below suggests.

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<sup>9</sup>C. Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, New York, 1992, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup>L. Weston, “Elegiac Desire and Female Community in *Baudonivia’s Life of Saint Redegund*” *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. F. Sautman and P. Sheingorn, New York and Hampshire, 2001, pp. 85-100, p. 86.

### Contemporary Perspectives on the Female Homoerotic Desire and the Clitoral Body

In her work on early-modern literature, Valerie Traub establishes the clitoral body and the desires of the chaste friend, not as the fundamental reality of 'lesbian' existence nor the redress of 'lesbian' invisibility, but as disputed points of entry in a dynamic, and historically mutable, fluctuating spectrum of female homoerotic desire.<sup>11</sup> Especially in convents it is notable that those characteristics of female relationships that had previously been considered "chaste" such as bed sharing and "harmless friendships" were increasingly perceived as dangerously indecent with the advent of reform and Reformation.<sup>12</sup> The author examines various religious discourses, in which the church undertook "regulation" of "erotic conduct".<sup>13</sup> Strict monitoring and repression of sexual activity led to the emergence of a climate of "increasing suspicion" about the "sharing of beds, kissing and caressing". Queer women's friendships, previously construed in pre-modern texts as adolescent longing, erotic similitude and loving laments, do not signify at all compared to later moments in the early-modern period when female same-sex desire begins to display "excessive" signifying power. Standards of visibility, which had previously read female-female eroticism as innocent, were increasingly influenced by more fearful religious ideologies. What used to be labeled "exclusive friendships" were now portrayed as "immoral", thereby posing a potential threat to other women as well as

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<sup>11</sup>Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early-Modern England*, p. 34. Traub observes that others also notice the problem of signification inherent in love between women. For instance, Rohy describes lesbianism as a "repository for failures of meaning inherent in figurality itself", and as a "symbol of resistance to symbolization", while Jagose inquires, "why is the problem of lesbianism so frequently a problem of representation?"

<sup>12</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 31.

to men, and generating a reaction of fear, anxiety, and tension in response to the desire to regulate the sexually unruly female body.<sup>14</sup>

As Traub states so eloquently, a tension exists between “visibility and invisibility, possibility and impossibility, significance and insignificance”; this arises from the signifying power of the female body, continuing to perplex historical representations of female same-sex desire.<sup>15</sup> In an attempt to overcome the ways that the lives of “lesbians” are “constricted and destroyed by silences and misinformation”, Traub uncovers glimpses of female homoerotic desire. Traub contrasts the invisibility of love between women before the sixteenth century, with its growing visibility during the early-modern period when female intimacy was reconfigured as a “problem in need of social discipline”.

The growing contradictions between the significance and insignificance of female homoerotic desire in early-modern England can be compared to diminishing appreciation for women’s position in Venetian religion, together with important changes in attitude toward love between women in Venice’s convents. As Edith Benkov and Guido Ruggerio both record, the lack of evidence that women were prosecuted for homoerotic activities in Venice during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries suggests that religious and secular authorities did not regard intimate relationships between women as a crime.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 19. The author retools certain psychoanalytic ideas about desire, anxiety, abjection, identification, melancholy and perversion as a way to address the interpretive problems in standards for representations of female-female desire. By correlating cultural discourses with a range of affective desire, Traub illuminates ‘lesbian’ practices in early-modern culture. Traub contrasts the invisibility of female homoerotic desire in pre-modern models of longing, emulation and erotic similitude against rhetoric that begins to stand out in early-modern anatomy books, midwiferies, travel narratives, obscenity, and other “imaginative” texts.

<sup>15</sup>Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup>In her essay on the erased lesbian in medieval Europe Benkov demonstrates that prosecutions of “lesbianism” in Venice during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were extremely rare; lesbianism was not disciplined in Venice because the authorities regarded women’s desire for women as a “non-crime”, E. Benkov, “The Erased Lesbian: Sodomy and the Legal Tradition in Medieval Europe” *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, F. Sautman and P. Sheingorn eds New York, 2001, pp. 101-122,

But Renaissance historian Jutta Sperling states that, while sex between women in Venice was never prosecuted, sexual affairs between enclosed religious women were increasingly observed and condemned by Church authorities beginning in the sixteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Another expert on Venice, Mary Laven, records that monastic women during the same period were now being rebuked for activities that were viewed as erotically arousing to other women, such as cross-dressing when performing in plays.<sup>18</sup>

To understand this shifting context, we need to examine more fully Traub's conclusions about female homoerotic desire in England, which may have some bearing on our understanding of what was going on in Venetian convents at a similar time. I think that the material covered in this thesis forces us to consider the boundaries between invisibility and visibility, significance and insignificance, for the past— but also for our future. Traub believes that the contradictions in historical depictions of female-female intimacy can also be correlated to existing misunderstandings and misinformation then and now about female homoerotic desire.<sup>19</sup> This historical contrast in representations of love between women that has been identified by Traub points to the problem inherent in making female homoeroticism legible in a heterosexual system, since the female body is a gender marker in that system.

Within the heterosexual dynamic of desire, queer women are perceived only as either nonsexual or sexually threatening to many male as well as female heterosexual viewers. If a heterosexual woman believes that a woman who identifies as queer regards

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p. 111. Benkov refers to G. Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, New York, 1985, p. 189 n. 21.

<sup>17</sup>J. Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, Chicago and London, 1999, pp. 160-164.

<sup>18</sup>M. Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent*, New York, 1993, pp. 140-43.

<sup>19</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, pp. 26-27.

her romantically, the glance signifies as threatening to the heteronormative woman. In order to reduce her anxiety around the way her own sexual identity may be perceived by others, it is necessary for the heteronormative woman to read the queer woman as nonsexual to mitigate the threat. Males who identify as heterosexual either (mistakenly) view two unfamiliar queer women together as nonsexual, or if the man is aware of the women's desire for each other, this idea arouses his own desire, or it is perceived as a threat to his masculinity. The signifying power of the female body is also a problem when representing female-female desire in 'lesbian' erotic art. Both male and female heterosexual viewers of female nude bodies in paintings almost always assume the content is heterosexual unless they suspect it may be queer—in which case the work signifies excessively, whilst also signifying inconclusively. In this way, female queer artists' and queer beholders' authentic desires are constantly misread by the dominant culture. It is hard to imagine similar mistakes in perception occurring if the erotic art focused on same-sex desire between men or between a heterosexual couple.

It is through such instances of the illegibility of the female body within a heterosexual system that queer women's sexual desires are rendered unreadable by the larger heteronormative culture. As Traub puts it, as long as female-female desire "abides" in the "intractability" of the female body, it can only signify as comfortably insignificant or disturbingly meaningful in a patriarchal system of reproduction. In a binary system of gender and sex, the indecipherability of the queer female body contributes to a state of melancholy, of "lesbian" identification as a form of cultural trauma. Traub states,

...the problem posed by *amor impossibilis* is less desire itself than the intractability of the physical body and the body's social function as a legible marker of gender within the patriarchal

system of reproduction.<sup>20</sup>

Other scholars of medieval same-sex love and desire among women, such as Sautman and Sheingorn, for example, suggest that depictions of desire between women do exist, but their content may not be acknowledged. According to Diane Wolfthal, “The scarcity of gay studies in medieval art might suggest a lack of imagery, but the real problem is that such images have been ignored”. Thus, Sautman and Sheingorn conclude that if “we attend to what we see” in medieval texts and images, glimpses of female homoeroticism can be made visible.<sup>21</sup> Academics who disregard what is obvious in the unconventional way the genders of Jesus are represented in the *Saviour* altarpiece also skirt the possibility of female same-sex desire in relation to such imagery. When Bynum and other scholars continue to insist that Quirizio portrays Jesus as mother in the *Saviour* only in his/her role as ‘holy food’, they radically distort our understanding of pre-modern women’s bodily expressions of gender and sex.

This distortion features in another related area of inquiry. Many academics continue to restrict their understanding of religious traditions, insisting that descriptions by mystics of longing for physical union with Jesus are not about sex. A growing number of scholars point out that Bynum assumes that religious responses are not sexual, continuing always to make gender and sexuality adjustments and interventions, a pattern that is especially evident when discussing women’s mystical unions with a feminized

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<sup>20</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 288.

<sup>21</sup>F. Sautman and P. Sheingorn, “Charting the Field”, *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, F. Sautman and P. Sheingorn eds., New York, 2001, pp. 1-48, p. 2. The authors refer to D. Wolfthal, “An Art Historical Response to ‘Gay Studies and Feminism: A Medievalist’s Perspective,’” *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, no. 14 (fall 1992): 17.

Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Bynum, therefore, could be said to be participating in scholarly analysis that is euphemistic, stating, for example, that orgasmic culminations experienced in the eucharist were not sublimated sexual responses, but sexual feelings that were “simply set free”.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, when she responds to Steinberg’s work on depictions of sexuality in the humanization of Jesus, she questions whether the reader can associate genitals with sexuality in late-medieval art, cautioning that perhaps pre-modern people did not interpret breasts and penises as erotic, or define themselves by their sexuality, in the way that modern people do.<sup>24</sup>

Bynum’s avoidance of the physical nature of Jesus’ sexuality is especially pertinent and provocative in relation to the way s/he is embodied in the *Saviour*. Bynum is hesitant to address desire and sexuality with respect to the body of Jesus, but she also asserts that in order to understand why the images and spiritual practices of late-medieval women “exulted” in physicality, we must examine the ways the body became a major spiritual concern between 1200 and 1500.<sup>25</sup> Another scholar in religious studies, Caroline Mooney, observes that a frequently noted feature of medieval women’s religion is its “bodily expression”.<sup>26</sup> This points to the critical relevance of my research into physical expressions of gender and sex on images of the body of Jesus, as well as the affective bodily expressions of pre-modern religious female bodies in Venice.

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<sup>22</sup>Goldberg, *Queering the Renaissance*, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 248. Bynum argues that “it seems inappropriate” to speak of physical union with Jesus (described in images of marriage, sexual consummation, orgasmic culmination, and accounts of handling and loving Christ’s body during the eucharist) as sublimated sexual desire.

<sup>24</sup>L. Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, New York, 1983. Steinberg writes that the *enfleshing* or sexualization of Jesus relates to his humanation.

<sup>25</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 251, where the author insists we “look further at the ways medieval people of both sexes demonstrate increasing concern with matter and corporality as religious issues”.

<sup>26</sup>C. Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, Philadelphia, 1999, pp. 12-13.

In response to the complex issues Bynum and others raise, this paper investigates the possible ways the body of a sexually inclusive, gender-transcending Jesus may be interpreted by a community of pre-modern women religious viewers/believers. My examination of the *Saviour* will make the possibility of queering the female subject on Murano more apparent so that we can move beyond scholarly forms of investigation that are still filtered through binary definitions of gender and sex. As we shall see in particular, although the evidence is circumstantial, the image of the wound and the text from the Song of Songs that appear in the *Saviour* work to construct a gendered sense of identity for the nuns living at the convent of Santa Chiara.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to consider the specific conditions that inhere in enclosed religious houses as part of the frame of reference for the *Saviour* altarpiece. The state of clausura made female monastics dependent on male priests for communion, although women's close relationship with the eucharist could at times also work to disrupt Church authority. Bynum claims that both nuns and the priests were well aware of the eucharist's disruptive power in female-gendered visions.<sup>28</sup> In her book on envisioning gender in later medieval Burgundian devotional art, Andrea Pearson argues, for example, that by receiving the eucharist personally from Jesus, Colette of Corbie circumvented priestly authority.<sup>29</sup> It

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<sup>27</sup>Lochrie, "Mystical Acts and Queer Tendencies", p. 187. Nancy Partner blames the persistence of conservative religious traditions for the continued use of euphemisms for sex in academic descriptions of mystical love. She notices that many modern medievalists comply with Catholic tradition and continue to explain explicit sexual references in the Song of Songs, for example, as metaphors for spiritual love, N. Partner, "Did Mystics Have Sex?" *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, Toronto, Buffalo, London, 1996, pp. 296-312. Further, in his work on the Song of Songs Norris criticizes contemporary reluctance to focus on the relationship between erotic love and the spiritual. As the author comments, "In recent times, the Song of Songs has been more a focus of literary than of religious or theological interest: for one reason or another, *eros*, it seems, has not been thought to enter into people's relation to God", Norris, ed., *Song of Songs*, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 23-31.

<sup>29</sup>Pearson, *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art*, pp. 32-33.

seems reasonable to propose, that the *Saviour* too, is another example of such a challenge to the priest's power over the eucharist.<sup>30</sup>

As Pearson has suggested, a culture of religious women, distinct from men, was established in this period within religious communities in Britain. Felicity Riddy, writing about late-medieval literature in Britain, describes a powerful "sub-culture" of women's "reading and viewing" communities, which emerged in convents and wealthy female-led households. Riddy argues that because they focused on books with religious and moral themes, these groups advanced the construction of a "feminine identity" separate and distinct from men.<sup>31</sup> In these women-only environments patriarchal gender stereotypes were not important as a result of the absence of men, the "visible reference" for socially-constructed gender norms.<sup>32</sup>

Riddy highlights Julian of Norwich's 'feminization' of God when she describes the part Julian of Norwich played in this female textual sub-culture, and this may prove to be relevant to the 'feminine' way Jesus is portrayed in the *Saviour*. Riddy points out that, in her writing, Julian of Norwich represents God as "maternal" by making him loving and peaceable, not angry and wrathful like "aristocratic" constructions of masculinity in late-medieval culture.<sup>33</sup> Riddy argues that because they focused on books with religious and moral themes all-female reading and viewing religious communities advanced the construction of a "feminine identity" separate and distinct from men. As Riddy claims,

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<sup>30</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, pp. XXVIII-XXIX.

<sup>31</sup>Pearson, *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art*, p. 45. Pearson refers to F. Riddy, "'Women Talking about the Things of God': A Late-Medieval Sub-culture," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1100-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale, London, 1993, pp. 104-127.

<sup>32</sup>Pearson, *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art*, p. 46.

<sup>33</sup>Riddy, "Women talking about the things of God", pp.111-117.

Julian's God "blurs" the boundaries of gender: "her God is both masculine and feminine, both high and low, both powerful and loving".

To support the notion of a gendered identity that is distinct to Franciscan nuns on the island of Murano, my examination and reconstruction of the specific context in which the *Saviour* was created uncovers compelling performances of desire, agency, and identity in the female-gendered, pre-modern body and self. Because clausura laws separated them from secular society, religious women lived almost exclusively within an all-female environment. When framed in this all-female religious setting, it is easy to see that the 'feminization' of Jesus in the *Saviour* altarpiece could be the visual articulation of just such a separately gendered identity. Similar to all-female religious communities in Britain, the gender distinctiveness of the Murano nuns may be reflected in their depiction of Jesus. Perhaps like Julian of Norwich, the community of women who worshipped in front of the *Saviour* altarpiece similarly envisioned Jesus as a blend between 'masculine' and 'feminine'.<sup>34</sup>

Lochrie does not deny the sexuality explicitly expressed in many medieval spiritual images and texts for mystical women. Instead, by looking at life-size illustrations of Jesus' upper-body wound in women's devotional texts, the author proposes to investigate what disrupts conventional models of courtly, heterosexual love, in the process dislodging gender categories.<sup>35</sup> Lochrie writes that the feminization of the body of Jesus is a distinctive characteristic of late-medieval religious belief, especially in

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<sup>34</sup>Riddy, "Women talking about the things of God", p.117, 1996. The idea of an all-female community and powerful women was not unheard of during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century in Italy. In the introduction to his work on the chronicle and necrology of the convent of Corpus Domini in Venice, Daniel Bornstein points out that Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* published in 1405 presents a vision of an ideal all-female community that led to an explosion of literary works celebrating the achievements of women, D. Bornstein, ed., *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: the Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*, Chicago and London, 2000, pp. xvii. and xxi.

<sup>35</sup>Lochrie, "Mystical Acts and Queer Tendencies," p. 182.

relation to female mystics. While this presentation is often solely interpreted as a maternal Jesus, the author stresses that the idea of Jesus as mother was just part of a series of adjustments in medieval belief systems. In fact, medieval devotion described a multi-gendered Jesus, who performed multiple roles including those of mother, husband, child *and* lover.<sup>36</sup>

The multi-gendered identity of Jesus is also made explicitly clear in the Vulgate version of the Song of Songs.<sup>37</sup> It is clear that all medieval church authorities did not agree on the gender identity of the speaker in the Song of Songs. While Jesus was believed by most to perform the role of the bride, Bernard of Clairvaux revived an earlier tradition that associated the bride in the poem with Mary.

The idea of Jesus' feminized body as lover and bride to religious women, as framed by devotion to the Song of Songs, may refer to female homoerotic desire. For instance, as discussed in her essay on Hildegard of Bingen's physical desire for Richardis, Susan Schabinoff points to the existence of female homoerotic desire directed toward a 'feminized' Jesus (as in the *Saviour*) within the sexualized language of the Song of Songs as early as the twelfth century. Schabinoff asks, if medieval Christians were familiar with the regendering of Jesus elsewhere—that is, focusing on his “so-called feminine” aspects to the point of contemplating images of him as biologically female—is it impossible that at least some Christian women might see Jesus as female in an eroticized text such as with the Song of Songs?<sup>38</sup> The author goes on to demonstrate that

<sup>36</sup>Lochrie, “Mystical Acts and Queer Tendencies”, p. 187.

<sup>37</sup> It is crucial to note in the case of the *Saviour* that, as Smart records, during the late-fifteenth century Bernard's interpretation was adopted in Venice, and Mary was identified as Jesus' mother *and* bride in the Song of Songs, A. Smart, *Dawn of Italian Painting: 1250-1400*, Oxford, 1978, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup>Schibanoff, “Hildegard of Bingen and Richardis of Stade” p. 66.

Hildegard “regendered” the Song in order to express her desire for Richardis.<sup>39</sup> It seems that Schibanoff’s observations may be relevant for our understanding of the lives of monastic women in pre-modern Venice.

In addition, it is important to consider that “lesbian love letters” dated to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries may be distinguished from medieval love poems written by men because women’s homoerotic poems depend on the sensual language of the Song of Songs.<sup>40</sup> As Ann Matter explains, in her inquiry into women-identified-women’s reliance on the Song of Songs, all these medieval “lesbian” voices speak from the courtly tradition of longing, separation, and hope for union with the object of love.<sup>41</sup> Like love in the Song of Songs and romantic love this “lesbian” love poetry focuses on the theme of unrequited love, with the poets describing themselves as separated from their beloved. Using imagery from the Song that can also be seen in the *Saviour*, in one letter the writer “languishes” like the turtledove that mourns forever on a “barren twig” after it has lost its mate. In another letter the author claims that the ‘worst misery’ is to be as she is, far from her beloved.<sup>42</sup> The knowledge that medieval women invoked the Song of Songs and the image of the turtledove in their expressions of unrequited love for other women makes possible the queering of the inscriptions and visual iconography represented in the *Saviour* altarpiece.

<sup>39</sup>Schibanoff, “Hildegard of Bingen and Richardis of Stade”, p. 68.

<sup>40</sup>Schibanoff, “Hildegard of Bingen and Richardis of Stade”, p. 64.

<sup>41</sup>E.A. Matter, “My Sister, My Spouse Women-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity”, *Weaving the Visions*, ed. J. Plaskow and C. Christ, San Francisco, 1989, pp. 51-62, p. 56.

<sup>42</sup>Schibanoff, “Hildegard of Bingen and Richardis of Stade”, pp. 64-65.

## Expressing Female Bodies

A crucial aspect to be thought about now is the issue of how female holy bodies were portrayed in early-modern European culture. I am particularly interested in the religious and sexual expression of the multiple subjectivities of female-gendered bodies whose similar issues of representation were often addressed through physical and visible changes concerning the body. Whether community response to women's bodily alterations in these cases was negative or positive, it is clearly apparent that such changes transformed the way the women were perceived by others. For religious women who disrupted heteronormative systems, their societal position shifted in accordance with the way such behavior was interpreted.

It is relevant to the context of the *Saviour* that, after the fifteenth century in Venice, women's manipulation of gender signifiers was offered as evidence in suspected cases of female same-sex desire. As I will also discuss in the following pages, because these bodily performances were associated with female homoeroticism, changing response in the Venetian republic toward such activities reveals an altered perspective in relation to the issue of female-female desire. As Traub explains, when female homoerotic acts were brought to trial:

...the primary concern of authorities was women's appropriation of masculine prerogatives, whether in the form of crossdressing and passing as a man, the use of instruments of genital penetration (dildoes made of leather, wood, or glass), or other challenges to patriarchal authority. Some statutes specifically mandated harsher punishments for acts involving "material instruments" or devices for penetration.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 44.

Male physicians, female midwives, and (male) lawyers prosecuted women for such bodily proof of women's homoeroticism. Female same-sex desire can be observed in documents that record the punitive measures taken to repress female cross-dressing and the use of "devices" for penetration following the 1500s. Sperling has identified female same-sex desire within Venetian convents in the sixteenth century; she discovered that within this context female-female relationships were nearly impossible for outside authorities to control.<sup>44</sup>

While performances of 'maleness' on the female body were criticized in religious and secular law, such behavior was generally viewed with ambivalence. In literature, however, historical or fictional women in male dress became popular, and were frequently praised as exemplary characters; thus cross-dressing could be empowering to the female performer. As Valerie Hotchkiss elaborates in her study of literary and historical female transvestism in medieval Europe, there are more instances of women in male dress than men who dress as females, perhaps because a masculine appearance freed women from the constraints of their assigned gender.<sup>45</sup> Cross-dressing was also an advantage in that it protected women from men's unwelcome sexual advances.<sup>46</sup> The author argues that because the ideals of youth and beauty in courtly romance often transcend sex and stipulate the same physical attributes for both young men and women, a woman's beardlessness and finer build might have been overlooked for years.<sup>47</sup> This

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<sup>44</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, p. 162.

<sup>45</sup>V. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross-Dressing in Medieval Europe*, New York and London, 1996, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup>Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup>Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, p. 11.

positive image of the female transvestite during the medieval period implies a tolerant view toward such behavior that disappeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>48</sup>

It is critical to emphasize, as well, that before the sixteenth century it is quite possible that female cross-dressing was also viewed in a positive way in religious circles around and in Venice. Hotchkiss reminds the reader that since early Christianity, for early female believers, to be Christian was to become more male or “male like”. In line with the concept of a separate identity of religious women, Hotchkiss states, “Women who aspired to be like men were distancing themselves from womankind.”<sup>49</sup> The idea that passing as a male was not punished in a religious context during the fifteenth century in the vicinity of Venice is also supported by Kate Lowe’s work on convent chronicles in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy. The author reveals a record of a fifteenth-century world-traveling, “transvestite” nun who dressed and lived as a man in the countryside near Florence.

Suor Eugenia di Tommaso da Treviso is described by chronicler Niccolini in the chronicle of the convent of Le Murate. Eugenia first arrived at the convent in 1450 then lived in two male observant Franciscan houses before she went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where she set up a hospice for pilgrims and a hospital for the sick. Near the end of the fifteenth century, after traveling to Portugal and receiving support from the queen for another hospital in Rome, Eugenia returned to Le Murate. Lowe does not record general public response to Eugenia’s queer behaviour, but it appears that the woman who transcribed the chronicle of Le Murate admired Eugenia.

<sup>48</sup>Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup>Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, pp. 12, 16. Jo Ann McNamara also describes in depth the ways that religious women aspired to become more manly, J. McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia*, Cambridge and London, 1996.

Lowe states that in Niccolini's eyes Eugenia was a convent "heroine". The author suggests Suor Eugenia or some of the other nuns at Le Murate were aware of a tradition of legendary "transvestite" saints, which included Saints Eugenia, Pelagia, Athanasia, Marina, Theodora, and Matrona.<sup>50</sup> Hotchkiss observes that female cross-dressing saints were seen as positive role models too, that female saints disguised as males signified female achievement of superior spirituality.<sup>51</sup>

The evidence that hagiographers sometimes represented female same-sex desire in the lives of medieval saints who disguised themselves as monks also establishes the potential for homoerotic desire between religious women. Transvestite saints like Eugenia and Susanna, for example, become objects of sexual attraction to other women while passing as monks.<sup>52</sup> The idea that a female saint could also become the object of desire for an entire female religious community has homoerotic implications too. Lisa Weston explains in her essay on elegiac desire and female community that, although desire was commonly directed toward Jesus in the setting of the Song of Songs, another strategy involved focusing the nuns' desire on a particular female saint. And, as Weston points out, making a female saint the "object of a focused communal homoaffectivity" creates a model for homosocial desire within female monastic culture.<sup>53</sup> It seems important to ask, then, could the alternative way Jesus' genders are visually represented in the *Saviour* altarpiece also make the painting's main subject the object of female same-sex desire?

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<sup>50</sup>Lowe, *Nun's Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy*, pp.165-168.

<sup>51</sup>Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, pp. 19-20, *Virgins of Venice*, pp.16-17.

<sup>52</sup>Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>53</sup>Weston, "Elegiac Desire and the Female Community in Baudonivia's *Life of Saint Radegund*", pp. 85-100, pp. 86-87.

It is clear that Venetian nuns strongly identified with female saints as well. In the necrology of the convent of Corpus Domini, Suor Bartolomeo Riccoboni describes the vision of Saint Ursula received by Suor Damiante just before her death in 1405. The twenty-year-old nun had an “excellent mind” for reading, singing, and writing, but like Saint Ursula she “longed for martyrdom”.<sup>54</sup> During the reform period, however, enclosed nuns who modeled themselves after cross-dressing female saints were no longer appreciated, at least, outside the convent. Laven writes that in Venice in 1618 Suor Gratirosa Raspi, a Franciscan nun from San Sepolcro, was captured as she tried to escape wearing male clothing. Gratirosa explained she was inspired from reading the lives of cross-dressing saints like Saints Eufrosina and Marina, whose relics were kept in Venice.<sup>55</sup>

Even the biological state of a woman’s body could participate in this economy of change and transformation. It has been amply documented, for instance, that during the medieval period learned people believed that women’s bodies could spontaneously change into male bodies. Medical authorities and the general public believed a woman’s previously inverted penis could voluntarily erupt from her body as a result of sudden motion or increased body temperature.<sup>56</sup> By the early-modern period, though, belief in such physical transformations in sex was not as certain. Villagers still narrated examples of miraculous sex changes during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the response to these bodily changes became more conflicting. To some, such physical

<sup>54</sup>Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, ed D. Bornstein, pp. 70-71.

<sup>55</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>56</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 45. In humoral theory physiological sex exists on a continuum; women are imperfect versions of men, but can occasionally turn into males. Laqueur also demonstrates that medieval and Renaissance ideas about sex and gender were based on a male one-sex model instead of the two-sex model, which dominates today, indicating that conceptions of both gender and sex are fluid, T. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1990.

changes in gender and sexual representation were evidence of the devil's corruption. Francesco Maria Guazzo, in his inquiry "Whether by Witchcraft and Devil's Work the Sexes can be Interchanged", records a number of instances of women who spontaneously transformed into men in Spain, Portugal, and Italy, demonstrating the widespread acceptance of this concept. Yet, according to the sixteenth-century French surgeon, Ambroise Paré, influential through his treatise *Des Monstres et Prodiges*, turning into a man represented a change from one species to another that could elevate a woman's status. When medical authorities increasingly pointed out the improbability of such impromptu changes to the body, by the end of the seventeenth century such bodily transformations in sex began to seem more impossible.

In the pre-modern period it was believed, moreover, that spontaneous alterations of the body could be caused by profound affective involvement with visual representations of Jesus' wounds. A specialist in late-medieval vision, Suzanne Biernoff argues that the intense identification with Jesus, evident in people whose bodies bore the marks of the Crucifixion during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, made vision into a bodily event. Seeing representations of Jesus' wounds in the visual imagery of the Passion meant physically merging with Jesus' body through a visual interaction. And, as Anne Derbes and other art historians contend, because the Franciscans were the first of any order to insert the iconography of the upper-body wound into representations of Francis in depictions of the Passion in order to promote their founder's more ardent association with Jesus' fleshly suffering, such examples of affective and bodily identification with Jesus reflect the authority of Franciscan ideology in medieval

spirituality.<sup>57</sup> It is also significant, as Biernoff stresses, that Francis of Assisi was Jesus' bride, providing evidence that it was possible to be transfigured into the image of Jesus through the force of love.<sup>58</sup> The idea of Francis as Jesus' bride also supports the belief that through the power of Jesus' love his imitators might experience transformations in gender and sex.

In this context it is critical to emphasize too, as Mooney does, that contrary to what her numerous male interpreters recorded, Clare and her followers did not emulate Mary, but, like Francis, they imitated Jesus.<sup>59</sup> Mooney states, "Clare's understanding of herself as a follower and imitator of Christ is so consistent throughout her writings that few medieval texts focused on her could ignore it".<sup>60</sup> In his analysis of the chronicle of Corpus Christi in Venice, Daniel Bornstein affirms too, that when the sisters received communion they longed to have the body of Jesus "in" them. "They yearned to be with him and to be like him".<sup>61</sup> As we see, to religious women the concept of *imitatio* also meant fusion with the ultimate body, the body of Jesus. Seeing the emotive display of Jesus' wounds in visual representations of Jesus was not only believing but was assimilation into his flesh and blood through a visual reciprocity.<sup>62</sup> During the medieval and pre-modern period the bodies of many more women than men who imitated Jesus became highly significant to their communities and beyond, especially when they displayed physical proof of the stigmata. As Bynum points out, during the late thirteenth

<sup>57</sup>A. Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late-medieval Italy*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 17.

<sup>58</sup>S. Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, Hampshire and New York, 2002, pp. 136-139.

<sup>59</sup>C. Mooney, "Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae" in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, Philadelphia, 1999, pp. 52-77.

<sup>60</sup>Mooney, "Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae", p. 76.

<sup>61</sup>D. Bornstein, editor and translator, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: the Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*. Chicago and London, 2000, p. 19.

<sup>62</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 136.

century Beatrice of Nazareth spoke of the stigmata as 'healthy wounds'.<sup>63</sup> Bynum also refers to several female mystics who apparently nursed from Jesus' breast. She includes an account too, of a vision experienced by Clare of Assisi in which she sucked from Francis' breast.<sup>64</sup>

### **Erotic Desire, Jesus' Breasts and the Iconography of the Wound**

In the medieval period many religious women reported receiving communion personally from Jesus' wound or breast in a vision, an experience that also appears to be referred to in the *Saviour*. Bynum, for instance, confirms that Catherine of Siena's letters are filled with representations of drinking from Jesus's breast; she points out that the depiction of the nursing Jesus is closely associated with the eucharist.<sup>65</sup> However, Lochrie argues that occasions of oral contact with Jesus' breast by female monastics during the pre-modern period not only concern the eucharist, but refer as well to sexual desire.<sup>66</sup> Lochrie complains that Bynum consistently interprets accounts in which Catherine of Siena relates in this way with Jesus merely as 'nursing metaphors' in an attempt to skirt the difficult problem of the *fleshy* nature of religious response. Lochrie writes that the explicitly sexual nature of Jesus' gesture and the sexual desire expressed in Catherine's slaking of her thirst are denied by Bynum's modern non-sexual construction of motherly nurturance. In fact, Catherine's biographer Raymond of Capua *does* imply a

<sup>63</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 246.

<sup>64</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 101. Bynum refers to "Il Processo di canonizzazione di S. Chiara d'Assisi" in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 13, 1920, pp. 458, 466.

<sup>65</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 166, 173.

<sup>66</sup>Peter Dinzelbacher also testifies to the sensual unions and feelings of "infused sweetness and loving emotion with Jesus, which were experienced by female as well as male mystics in twelfth century England", "The Beginnings of Mysticism Experienced in Twelfth-Century England," *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987, pp. 111-131.

sexual meaning when he describes the moment Jesus put his right hand on Catherine's neck and drew her toward the wound. To queer Jesus' gesture and the mystic's desire requires only that the reader entertain an "open mesh" of possibilities, including not only the maternal's ability to perform erotically here but also the sacred wound's many, coexisting possible meanings.<sup>67</sup>

Lochrie continues that once the heterosexual matrix is suspended, another cultural reference point becomes clear. A previously unrecognized form of mystical devotion to Jesus' wound as vulva/vagina is made visible. In a fourteenth-century illustration of the Man of Sorrows, for example, the wound is isolated from Jesus' body and enlarged to life size. Lochrie observes that the sexual connotation of this image is unmistakable. Notably, when discussing a similar representation of the wound from the *Psalter and Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg*, Lochrie elaborates that this iconography also signifies the "wounding" that is meant to take place in the viewer's heart, as in the Song of Songs, when the worshipper is wounded with desire (fig. 3).

In a later essay by Flora Lewis, the author argues that such imagery of the wound could be viewed as female, and a location of sexual union and birth.<sup>68</sup> She writes that the first images of the "life-size" wound are included in French manuscripts belonging to the laity from the 1320s. As Riddy suggests, when writing about the separately gendered identity of religious women in Britain, Lewis grants that many such illustrations were probably produced for the context of aristocratic nuns. For instance, a manuscript written in the early fourteenth century for Kunigunde, abbess of St. George's Benedictine

<sup>67</sup>Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," pp. 188-89.

<sup>68</sup>F. Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side and the Instruments of the Passion: Gendered Experience and Response", *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, ed. L. Smith and J. Taylor, Toronto and Buffalo, 1997, pp. 204-229, p. 213.

convent in Prague, also includes similar images of the wound. Kunigunde was of royal birth, and raised by the Poor Clares, then entered a Benedictine convent after her marriage ended. Lewis also acknowledges the prevalence of the Song of Songs within such all-female religious communities.<sup>69</sup>

But, although Lewis' stated purpose is to concentrate on the role gender plays in response to the wound she never discusses the subject of female desire toward a 'feminized' Jesus in relation to such imagery. And from this limited perspective, Lewis, like Bynum, impedes our understanding of pre-modern women's bodily performances of gender and sex. While Lewis notices that nuns in particular played an important part in creating the earliest representations of the life-size wound, the author questions whether these women could have grasped the sexual meaning conveyed by the iconography. Just the same, Lewis has no difficulty in projecting that men could use representations of the wound to "express erotic play".<sup>70</sup> While Lewis admits the obvious suitability of a certain manuscript illustration for women's religious devotion, she takes pains to point out that the illustration would also enable a male viewer, in this case a Dominican friar, to imagine himself as the penetrating *sponsa*, who is seen here piercing the "naked and sexually indeterminate" body of Jesus (fig. 4).<sup>71</sup> She is careful to qualify that men could adopt the essence of the female soul (in order, it seems, to ensure that intercourse with Jesus would remain heterosexual). In this way the author appears compelled to demonstrate, that a medieval rendition of a 'feminine' Jesus, (which, it has been argued by others, was produced for a female patron), could also have been interacted with by a

<sup>69</sup>Lewis, p. 206. Lewis writes that the mid-fourteenth century depiction of the wound in the Luxembourg Psalter, which Lochrie also discusses, was produced for a royal context.

<sup>70</sup>Lewis acknowledges that the concept of bodily union with Jesus belongs to the history of the iconography of the wound, "The Wound in Christ's Side", p.215.

<sup>71</sup>Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side", FIG. 93, p. 213.

heterosexual male viewer.<sup>72</sup> Thus, with these corrections and interventions, Lewis makes it feasible to read the image from a heteronormative point of view.

However, with respect to a friar's female soul having sex with a 'feminized' Jesus, Lewis fails to address the issue of male same-sex desire. As well, the author is apparently blind toward the sexual message conveyed to female viewers by the pictured woman who kneels to Jesus right, and aims the point of her spear directly toward the wound. But, contrary to Lewis' perspective, from another point of view, it appears straightforward to theorize a female viewer for this work. As Lewis herself describes it, Jesus' body is represented as a blend between male and female. Similar to the inscription seen in the *Saviour*, the manuscript illustration is accompanied by a verse from the Song of Songs, which looks to be directed toward a female beholder; in this case the text reads, "Thou hast wounded my heart, my sister, my spouse". Lewis also notices that an image of Kunigunde with Jesus offering her the wound voices the fear of separation instead of the joy of union.<sup>73</sup> It is important to note, that as in the *Saviour*, in the Rothschild illustration, Jesus is shown as the Man of Sorrows. What is more, Lochrie points to evidence, that depictions of the wound, in religious texts by and for women, were a focus for sexual experiences of mystical intercourse with Jesus as the Man of Sorrows. These devotional texts and books of religious instruction explicitly invite women to "touch, kiss, suck, and enter" Jesus' wound.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side", pp. 212-15. According to Lewis, art historian Jeffrey Hamburger ascribes the manuscript to a female religious patron. Lewis explains that a significant section of the manuscript, which is known as the Rothschild Canticles, focuses on the Song of Songs.

<sup>73</sup>Lewis, p. 213.

<sup>74</sup>Lochrie, "Mystical Acts and Queer Tendencies," p. 190.

## Emotion and Embodiment in Female Constructions of the Self

As the cultural construction of the self is explored in recent scholarship, an increasing number of scholars have proposed that ideas about the body, gender and sexuality emerge from the specific concerns of individuals in communities within particular contexts. In *Feminist Readings of Early-modern Culture*, for example, the editors contend that the social and psychological self is constantly emerging and is related to specific historical contexts. Historically the gendered subject is always and has always been re-imagined. The subject is always, though not essentially, socially defined and constructed as gendered.<sup>75</sup> Pearson states too that most writers define gender as a socially constructed “condition” in which a “multiplicity” of meanings and associations are “grafted” onto male and female bodies to mold the “identities, experiences, responses, and interrelations” of men and women.<sup>76</sup>

In an introduction to a collection of essays on human sexuality in the medieval and early-modern world, Jaqueline Murray explores Foucault’s idea that sexuality is a social construction, a product of a particular time and place. Nevertheless, Foucault also warns, modern psychoanalytic self-revelation actually mimics medieval institutions of sacramental confession and self-scrutiny, reminding us that these ‘technologies of the self’ contributed to contemporary attitudes about sexuality.<sup>77</sup> Murray recalls that Foucault challenged historians to examine sexual activity in its historical context. She emphasizes that to look at sexual values in their own circumstances is especially

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<sup>75</sup>Traub, Kaplan, and Callaghan, “Introduction”, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup>Pearson, *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art*, p. 24.

<sup>77</sup>J. Murray. *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*. Toronto Buffalo London, 1996, pp. ix-xv.

important for those who study the period between antiquity and modernity, which Foucault identified as central in the development of sexuality. As Murray points out, it is especially interesting that many medievalists criticize Foucault because he failed to address adequately the relevant period of history he highlighted. What is more, we should note that Foucault neglected the presence of emotion and embodiment in the construction of the self, and completely excluded women's experience of sexuality, a limitation that, incidentally, is present in other scholars' approaches to the possibility of queering in images and texts like the *Saviour*.<sup>78</sup>

Mooney asserts that the contemporaneous voices that record the lives of gendered subjects are biased by societal configurations of gender. They speak from the culturally constructed perspectives of their own gender, and this distorts many historical representations of particular subjects. For instance, the gender of medieval authors influences historical representations of religious medieval women, and most depictions of holy women can be found only in texts written by men. Mooney notices that these male-authored depictions of religious women speak more about men's idealized impressions of women's holiness and its embodiment in women's lives than they reveal about the women themselves.<sup>79</sup> Also, men often controlled women's voices through their manipulative questioning of women.<sup>80</sup> Mooney states, "where women appear to speak in

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<sup>78</sup>Murray, *Desire and Discipline*, p. x. Murray refers to Peter Brown, Joyce E. Salisbury and Aline Rousselle in order to outline the historical origins of the harsh moral code on which prescribed pre-modern sexual behavior was based. Foucault also does not adequately address non-heterosexual experiences of human sexuality.

<sup>79</sup>Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, p. 3.

<sup>80</sup>Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, p. 8.

their own voices, they speak of themselves in decidedly more active and assertive terms than do their male promoters.”<sup>81</sup>

Some contemporary scholars suggest further frames of reference that may be helpful in relation to translating representational problems of gender in more inclusive and consequently more authentic ways, especially an image like the *Saviour*. The first of these comes from the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler. In particular, Butler argues that gender *and* sex are performative and looks into the way the problem of the “materiality” of the body is linked to the “performativity” of gender.<sup>82</sup> Butler delves further into the ways the category of sex figures within such a relationship; sexual difference is frequently invoked as a question of material differences, which is “marked and formed” by discursive practices. The category of sex is not “normative” from the start; it is what Foucault named a ‘regulatory ideal’. As Butler asserts, ‘sex’ is an “ideal” standard that is “forcibly materialized” over time.<sup>83</sup> The author also proposes, in psychoanalytic terms, that the relationship between gender and sexuality is partly determined by looking at the relationship between identification and desire. She points out that “to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence” of masculine identity, “whatever that is”. Butler’s contention that the heterosexual matrix is an “*imaginary*” logic, which “insistently issues forth its own unmanageability”, is particularly relevant to my work here.<sup>84</sup>

Traub describes desire between women as “intense emotional investment” and “compelling erotic attraction”, which early-moderns identified as “love, passion, appetite

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<sup>81</sup>Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, p. 11.

<sup>82</sup>J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York and London, 1993, pp. 1-2.

<sup>83</sup>Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup>Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 239.

and lust". Though many aspects of female homoerotic desire do focus on the genitals, other resources of the body are equally gratifying and erotogenic. The multiple forms of erotic desire include "caresses, kisses, bodily penetration, and passionate verbal addresses expressing longing, loss, devotion, frustration, pleasure and pain".<sup>85</sup> Traub also reminds the reader that practitioners and theorists of sadomasochism intentionally seek non-genital possibilities of pleasure and pain on the surface of the body. And, as Lochrie has stated, "mystical sex is not just 'sex as we know it', but that more troubling field of experience that strays into the realms of violence, suffering, and torture."<sup>86</sup> As we shall see, the relationship between bodily pain, pleasure and sex is particularly relevant to pre-modern women's bodily expression and participation in religion. It is recorded that medieval and pre-modern women who were emulating the idea of *imitatio Christi* mutilated their bodies more than men, using nettles, flails, and thorns to do so.<sup>87</sup> In fact, evidence from the chronicle and necrology of Corpus Domini in Venice indicates that fasting, self-flagellation, and other forms of physical abstinence frequently ruined young and otherwise healthy female bodies, often endangering the lives of these women.<sup>88</sup>

In conclusion, I think it is notable that Traub's descriptions of early-modern female homoerotic desire are evocative of the way affective desire is framed in early versions of the Song of Songs. Like fleshly desire in the biblical text, female-female desire does not have a genital focus that is foreign, but involves the emotions as well as

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<sup>85</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 13.

<sup>86</sup>Lochrie, "Mystical Acts and Queer Tendencies," p.183.

<sup>87</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 212.

<sup>88</sup>As Bornstein elaborates, "sickness and pain figure prominently" in the necrology of Corpus Christi, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, p. 18. Many of the sisters were in bed with illnesses for years and a significant percentage of the convent's population died between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two, probably as Riccoboni frequently suggests, from vigils, self-flagellation and fasting, "Necrology of Corpus Domini" *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: the chronicle and necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*, Chicago and London, 2000, pp. 64-101.

the entire body. Traub makes another, equally important contribution to our knowledge of the early-modern past, offering an insight that is helpful for understanding our contemporary location as multi-gendered subjects. She foregrounds the construction of the “lesbian” subject through experiences of loss and mourning with reference to Freud’s ideas on melancholia and mourning. In words evocative of expressions of sexual longing in the Song of Songs, melancholia acts like an “open wound”, drawing “cathectic” energies from all directions towards itself.<sup>89</sup> Her work is thus critically important to our comprehension of past and present, in order for us to be able as a culture to look beyond the heterosexist bind and queer texts and images from the past.

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<sup>89</sup>Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, pp. 349-50.

## Chapter Two: The Mutability of Symbols—Franciscan Development of the Wound Symbol

The following inquiry into the origins of the iconographic detail of the wound in the *Saviour* helps us to recognize the mutability of symbols. In particular, I will show how this symbol changes its significance in relation to the particular functions it performs for different audiences. By tracking the Franciscan development of the wound iconography, we can postulate that the Poor Clares on Murano participated in a tradition of religious practice in which women (and some men) experimented with disrupting binary models of gender and sex in their desire to be like and merge with Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Occasionally such alternative configurations of identity involved performances of gender on the body. Further, it becomes apparent that the movement and transformation of the wound symbol from body to body was connected with new ideas concerning gender and sex.

Fundamental to this discussion is the work of Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn. They discuss the ways the cultural construction of the figure of Saint Anne works as a symbol, modifying its meaning in relation to the communities it supports.<sup>2</sup> Sheingorn examines changes in visual representations of the Holy Kinship as a way to understand gender and family within medieval culture, arguing that alterations to the iconography reflect cultural struggles and attitudinal changes in respect to gender roles

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<sup>1</sup>Goffen reveals that the Franciscans have a long history in Venice, R. Goffen, *Piety and Patronage in Renaissance Venice: Bellini, Titian, and the Franciscans*, New Haven and London, 1986. Sperling writes that Santa Chiara di Murano was founded around 1300, *Convents and the Body Politic*, p. 249.

<sup>2</sup>Ashley and Sheingorn, ed., *Interpreting Cultural Symbols*, pp.1-11.

and family relationships. For instance, she posits that certain late medieval Holy Kinship imagery is a conscious female rebuttal to the patriarchal Tree of Jesse.<sup>3</sup>

For the purposes of this study, it is crucial to note, as Bynum does, the polysemous, fertile, and paradoxical quality of symbols, which Christian symbols share with all symbols.<sup>4</sup> As she states, “not all symbols are dichotomous”; they may employ and reference “contradictions and mutual exclusions, but they may also be paradoxes (in which contradictions occur simultaneously) or syntheses (in which contradictions are themselves negated in fusion)”.<sup>5</sup>

Speaking in particular of religious approaches to Jesus’ passion and the image of the wound, Flora Lewis comments on the fluidity evident in the wound iconography, that it demonstrates its many possible configurations and functions. Visual and textual representations of the wounding of Jesus or Francis are extremely varied and fluid in form, and polyvalent in the responses they evoke. Lewis asserts that such imagery is key to understanding devotional attitudes to the Passion in the late middle ages.<sup>6</sup>

As the above suggests, the movement of and changes to the wound symbol could be more fully appreciated by searching for contextual meanings that led to such bodily changes in the visual representations of particular religious figures. The wound’s transformations on the bodies of Francis and Jesus and its progression to the bodies of others, including female-gendered bodies, through a variety of media and in different geographical locations, underscores the dynamic function of the imagery in conveying particular attitudes and ideas.

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<sup>3</sup>P. Sheingorn, “Appropriating the Holy Kinship: Gender and Family History” in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols*, pp. 169-198.

<sup>4</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 278.

<sup>5</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 281.

<sup>6</sup>Lewis, “The Wound in Christ’s Side,” p. 223.

### **The Eucharist, The Feast of Corpus Christi and The Symbolic System**

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a new Church feast associated with the eucharist, known as Corpus Christi, emerged.<sup>7</sup> Miri Rubin examines changes to the symbolic language of the eucharist from the eleventh century through the early-modern period in order to understand how cultural systems of medieval religion functioned. For instance, by examining the liturgy, legislation and art created for the celebration of Corpus Christi, Rubin is able to address the ways that the host and its relationship to Jesus' body became central areas of discussion and dissent. Rubin writes that changes to eucharistic symbolism pertain in unpredictable ways to a myriad of contextually based meanings, including life experience and gender.<sup>8</sup> As Rubin stresses, with the pronouncement of the doctrine of transubstantiation, changes to the eucharistic system transformed medieval hierarchies of gender and religion.<sup>9</sup> This idea, that established belief systems can also be challenged by altering their symbols, assists us in analyzing the iconography of the wound in the *Saviour*. Rubin's theory seems applicable to my investigation of the possible connotations of Jesus' gender/s as represented on his/her body in the *Saviour* altarpiece.

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<sup>7</sup>Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy*, p. 19. Derbes explores the influential role Franciscans played in the development of theological concepts related to the passion of Jesus. Francis, as well as his followers, participated in the discourse that led to the pronouncement of the doctrine of transubstantiation at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.

<sup>8</sup>M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne and Sydney, 1991. Rubin tracks the historical changes to the eucharist, illustrating its widening importance in particular aspects of early modern culture, including questions of authority.

<sup>9</sup>Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, pp. 5-10. Rubin records that the feast of Corpus Christi was adopted by the Dominicans in Liege in 1251, by Venice in 1295, pp. 174-181.

As Anne Derbes elaborates, the doctrine of transubstantiation asserts the physicality of Jesus on the altar, at the host's consecration.<sup>10</sup> With the introduction of the doctrine of substantiation, religious concerns became more focused on the corporeal nature of Jesus in the communion wafer and wine. The physical presence of Jesus' body in the host was a visual experience. The appearance of the priest holding the communion wafer was also a "veil" through which Jesus could be "spiritually" or "mystically" seen.<sup>11</sup> Bynum records that women's experiences of the eucharist were frequently associated with visions too.<sup>12</sup> Many female mystics in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries reported seeing Jesus crucified when the host was elevated, or seeing Jesus showing them his wounds as he gave them communion.<sup>13</sup> In her discussion of religious houses in Villers, Lewis writes that monks promoted the spiritual achievements of the nuns and beguines by recording their visions.<sup>14</sup> Women's apparent ability to see the wounds or the body of Jesus furthered the cause of the Church by persuading many others of the possibility of Jesus' physical manifestation in the host.

Sight was crucial too, for religious women and men, in visualizing the physical reality and suffering of Jesus in devotions. Lewis explains that, during the thirteenth century, the visual emphasis on Jesus's wounds, both in Last Judgements and Crucifixions became much greater. The visionary component in all of these narratives was one way to establish the authority of the message "(and the messenger)", but it also conveyed a longing for a personal relationship between the human and the divine. For

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<sup>10</sup>Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 230.

<sup>13</sup>Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy*, pp. 17-18. Dominican nuns at Corpus Domini in Venice continued to see Jesus in the communion wafer in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Bornstein, ed. *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup>Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side", p. 208.

this reason, as Lewis points out, the structure of the images themselves relies on the conventions of vision and meditation. The viewers address their devotions to Jesus, and Jesus in turn responds with implied dialogue and gesture.<sup>15</sup> Alistair Smart observes that, according to legend, the Franciscan movement itself arose from the words spoken to Francis as he meditated on the crucifix located over the altar in the church of San Damiano, outside Assisi, reminding us of the power of the visual in animating religious response in this period.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that the eucharist could not be blessed by either a layperson or a woman instilled more power in the priest.<sup>17</sup> Because transubstantiation occurred only at the moment of the priest's consecration, his role became essential to communion. Stricter enclosure laws during the reform period made women progressively more reliant on friars and priests for communion, too. In the late sixteenth century at least, it appears that at times there were not enough priests to satisfy the confessional needs in women's religious communities. Lowe writes, for example, that at Le Murate in Florence it was difficult to find replacements for several priests who fell ill because the demands of the job were so heavy.<sup>18</sup>

Derbes and others suggest that the first appearance of the stigmata and the upper-body wound in Franciscan imagery during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries relates to Franciscan propaganda that promoted Francis as *alter Christus*.<sup>19</sup> The wound's

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<sup>15</sup>Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side", pp. 209-10.

<sup>16</sup>A. Smart, *Dawn of Italian Painting: 1250-1400*, Oxford, 1978, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 35-36 and p. 13.

<sup>18</sup>Lowe, *Nuns Chronicles and Convent Culture*, p. 201. Because each nun spent two or three hours with him, the convent priest spent much of every day in the confessional. Riccoboni writes, that in the late fourteenth century the sisters at Corpus Domini received communion every week, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>19</sup>Derbes claims that the Franciscan adaptation and proliferation of Passion imagery during the thirteenth century was intended to proclaim Francis as *alter Christus*. In *Franciscans and Art Patronage in Late*

insertion into visual representations of the movement's founder associates Francis with Jesus' part-fleshly, part-divine significance. The symbol linked Francis with Jesus' fleshly passion—his physical death, resurrection, and divinity. The employment of the upper-body wound to symbolize Francis's likeness to Jesus worked to gain papal approval for the Franciscan movement. With these artistic developments, Francis' role continued to expand, and as with the figure of Saint Anne, he became a powerful religious figure imbued with particular symbolism, including importantly, for this survey, with respect to female Franciscans.

As I will demonstrate, the earliest examples of the wound in connection with the figure of Francis near Assisi in the mid-thirteenth century show obvious stylistic differences. Near the end of the century, however, the iconography of the wound had stabilized into a particular iconographic model, which artists were able to include with different types of visual representations of Francis and translate into a variety of media. At about that time, the iconography of the wound moved again, from the figure of Francis and was added to the figure of Jesus in paintings at Padua. As ideas about Francis and Jesus were constructed in relation to various societal and religious issues, the visual symbol of the wound also traveled and metamorphosed within a growing matrix of cultural contexts. The evidence shows too that the symbol is often linked to representing the response and participation of women in religion.

There can be no doubt that Franciscan women, whether secular or religious, were major participators in imitating Jesus through their own fleshly suffering. Besides, it is

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*Medieval Italy*, 2004, Bourdua also suggests that Franciscan artistic programs in the thirteenth century intentionally promoted Francis' stigmata, especially the upper-body wound, in order to demonstrate the "conformity of Francis and Christ", pp, 2-3, and 10. Like Derbes, Bourdua notes the powerful visual influence the mendicant orders, particularly the Franciscans and Dominicans expressed in medieval Italy.

evident that women made significant contributions in material ways to promoting the ideology of *imitatio Christi* in Franciscan artistic programs. For instance, Elvio Lunghi reminds us, that during the later thirteenth century, female bequests made to San Francesco in Assisi outnumbered donor support by males. Lunghi states that, around 1300, Franciscan women's expression of fleshly suffering moved into the secular world. The increase of women in penitential practices was women's response to the strict re-enforcement of female enclosure laws in the thirteenth century. Through participation in these "new forms of religious expression", women who desired a spiritual vocation were not obliged to accept the enclosed life of the convent.<sup>20</sup>

Derbes reminds the reader that Franciscans commissioned most of the thirteenth-century passion cycle frescoes extant in central Italy; she states that identification with and imitation of Jesus' suffering during the Passion grew with the expansion of the Franciscan movement. The author also observes that, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the majority of Franciscan passion imagery focuses on Francis.<sup>21</sup> In this way Franciscan concerns became important to the emergence of Italian narrative painting in Italy. Although the imitation of Jesus was not limited to the Franciscans, at this time only they visually represented Francis's wounds in order to promote their founder's more intense empathy with the sufferings of Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

Lunghi documents the "enormous growth" in religious activity among women with a secular and penitential vocation, writing,

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<sup>20</sup>E. Lunghi, *Basilica of St. Francis*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>21</sup>Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup>Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, p. 17. Derbes attributes the depiction of the wound with Francis to the fact that Bonaventure, who particularly supported parallels between Francis and Jesus, became Minister General of the Franciscan Order in 1257.

Angela da Foligno, Margherita da Cortona, Chiara da Montefalco, and Margherita da Città di Castello left a deep mark on the society of the day, building up a huge following among those women who, while wishing to respond to the call of the Lord, did not want to be shut up inside the walls of a strict cloister.<sup>23</sup>

Around the beginning of the fourteenth century, the lower church of San Francesco at Assisi was renovated to accommodate private sepulchers and pilgrims in Francis' crypt. Women were now permitted to use this part of the church for their penitential activities.<sup>24</sup>

In his catalogue of early Italian imagery related to Francis, Cook states that there are no known representations of Francis showing the upper-body wound before 1255; the earliest known depiction of Francis was made for an early Franciscan church in Pescia in 1235.<sup>25</sup> Cook's survey demonstrates that the Pescia example, as well as other such early representations of Francis, depict stigmata on both hands and feet but do not show an upper-body wound (fig. 5). A panel of Francis dated to around 1255 is the earliest Italian image showing the opening, in the right breast area of Francis's habit, which reveals the wound (fig. 6). Cook is convinced that the appearance of the "side wound" at this time is related to a dispute during the pontificate of Alexander IV over the authenticity of Francis's wounds. The wound was validated by Alexander IV's bulls such that it became "almost obligatory" in Franciscan churches to depict Francis this way. We are reminded here of the power of visual representation in the promotion of specific cults and the various phases they undergo.

<sup>23</sup>Lunghi, *Basilica of St. Francis*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>24</sup>Lunghi, *Basilica of St. Francis*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>25</sup>W. Cook, *Images of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 165. The image is signed and dated, "Bonaventura Berlinghieri of Lucca, 1235".

It is apparent that early depictions of Francis displaying the upper-body wound were often located beside, or included in paintings that focused on Mary. Lunghi writes that the large number of paintings devoted to Mary in Franciscan churches in the latter part of the thirteenth century tended to obscure early representations of Francis. Nevertheless, two representations of the male mystic from around 1280 and attributed to Cimabue show the variability still common at that time in visual representations of Francis's upper-body wound. One of these images shows up in the fresco titled *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Four Angels and Saint Francis*, which was painted for the lower church in Assisi (fig. 7). Lunghi states that this portrait of Francis is an "important prototype" as it would have been highly visible due to the popularity and prominent location of the *Madonna and Child Enthroned*. The fresco was situated in San Francesco at Assisi, in the right transept, near the passageway leading to the chapel of the Maddelena, and positioned above an altar, which was likely dedicated to Mary since the late thirteenth century.

The other contemporary representation of Francis, which incorporates the upper-body wound, is attributed to Cimabue, or a close follower (fig. 8). Cook writes that this tempera panel of Francis probably copies the fresco in the lower church at Assisi.<sup>26</sup> Although there are clear similarities in many areas, the marked discrepancies in the ways the upper-body wound is depicted in each piece are striking. Different artistic strategies used to describe the wound, as well as the similar dates of the paintings, point to the lack of one standard iconographic pattern.<sup>27</sup> For example, in the fresco the highlighted, clearly defined edges of the wound, represented horizontally just under Francis' breast, are

<sup>26</sup>Cook, *Images of St. Francis*, p. 68. According to Lunghi, the attribution to Cimabue of the Saint Francis in the lower church has never been questioned.

<sup>27</sup>Lunghi, *Basilica of St. Francis*, pp.10, 20.

exposed by a jagged-edged, irregular hole in the mystic's habit. Although the edge of fabric that encircles the wound is represented in a seemingly haphazard way, it is curious that a strategically placed flap of cloth hides the area of the breast where the nipple is located. Also, a triangular flap of cloth on the left appears to point toward the wound.

Conversely, on the panel, the way the wound is depicted differs in several ways. The opening in the habit forms the shape of an elongated, pointed triangle. Through this opening, as in the first image, a bare area of flesh is situated next to Francis's right forearm. However, the fuzzy-edged, dark smudge that represents the wound sits at a diagonal angle in relation to Francis's upper-body. While there is no nipple visible here, it could be said that the modeled patch of flesh on Francis's chest resembles a woman's breast, and that the wound is located where a nipple might be. The clearly defined edges of the opening, and the short, uniform, stitch-like marks that border it also differ significantly from the ragged fabric, which frames the wound in the fresco. It could be argued that the representation of the wound on the panel even resembles the vulva/vagina Lochrie makes visible when she 'suspends' the heterosexual matrix in her discussion of the subsequent fourteenth-century illustrations of the wound with respect to Jesus as the Man of Sorrows. In the image of Francis, a connotation of the wound as vulva/vagina also seems possible. The idea that this early example of Francis's wound is evocative of later images of Jesus' wound as vulva/vagina/breast indicates that perhaps the iconography originated from a common background of devotional strategies. It leads one to wonder, in this case, whether the wound may also have been a focus for women or men's affective experiences of mystical communion with Francis.

As the iconography of the wound spread further into pictorial narrative cycles that focused on Francis's life, and the promotion of the Franciscan order, the symbol also continued to develop in stylistic ways. By the end of the thirteenth century the most prevalent iconography used to represent the wound was further popularized, making it more widespread and standardized. In the *Legend of Saint Francis* cycle in the upper church at Assisi, Francis displays the wound to Gregory in an image of Gregory IX's dream from around 1297 attributed to 'Giotto' (fig. 9).<sup>28</sup> Cook also writes about a sculpture of Francis from Siena in the early fourteenth century that shows the wound in a similar fashion to Giotto's Francis, in the Assisi scene depicting Gregory's dream (fig.10). Francis holds an open book in his left hand, which Cook records is inscribed with the beginning of the Franciscan Rule, taken by female and male Franciscans, the vow to live in obedience, poverty, and chastity. Cook writes that the prominence of the "side" wound in the Siena sculpture emphasizes Francis' likeness to Jesus. The sculpture refers to Giotto's model, or another like it, such as the representation of Francis by Simone Martini in the lower Church at Assisi (fig. 11). The clear resemblances between these three representations of Francis showing the wound testify to a shared history of artistic, religious and cultural influences.

### **The Wound Symbol Moves to Jesus**

Another image attributed to 'Giotto' indicates that the iconography of the wound migrated again, within the Franciscan movement, onto the figure of Jesus, in the early

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<sup>28</sup>Lunghi dates the completion of the *Legend of Saint Francis* in the upper church at Assisi to around 1297. Giotto's work has a "Gothic touch", and Giotto's "main collaborator" was "a certain Palmerino from Siena", *Basilica of St. Francis*, p. 67.

fourteenth century. The familiar image of Jesus enthroned, in the *Last Judgement* from the Arena Chapel at Padua, which dates to around 1304, appears to be one of the earliest examples of this progression. In the Arena Chapel *Last Judgement* Jesus shows the wound framed by an almond-shaped hole or slit in his gown (fig. 12). It is important to this inquiry into the artistic history of the *Saviour* that this early example of the wound with Jesus is represented in a chapel dedicated to Mary and the Annunciation.

This instance of the wound iconography, which before was used to refer to Francis' wound, is employed now, instead, to represent the symbol on the body of Jesus. This new configuration of the wound iconography raises the question: What were the cultural circumstances that prompted its movement at this time from Francis to Jesus? Although it might be assumed that it is merely a result of increased devotion to Jesus' wounds, part of late-medieval affective responses, I argue here that the appearance of the symbol could, at least in part, be linked to the continued elevation of Mary and the experimentation with 'feminized' qualities within certain Franciscan contexts.

### **Representing the Wound: the Visual Evidence**

A slightly earlier example of the wound iconography, with respect to Jesus, and also from the Padua area, is represented in a page of a lectionary produced for the cathedral of Padua, datable to the late-duecento (fig. 13). It appears that this example of the symbol indicates the increased prominence of the female gender in artistic commissions. The work is attributed to a "Maestro padovano", but closely resembles another manuscript image made for the cathedral of Padua, which shows Jesus without

the wound that is attributed to a “Maestro di Gherarduccio”.<sup>29</sup> These paintings both portray Jesus risen from the tomb and gesturing toward a kneeling Mary Magdalen, as in other traditional *Noli Me Tangere* scenes of the Resurrection. As King has observed with respect to images of the three Marys at the tomb, these manuscript illustrations appear to be directed toward the female viewer, and were possibly intended to affirm Mary Magdalen’s early presence at the Resurrection.

Around the mid-fourteenth century, the wound symbol progressed for the first time past Franciscan boundaries and exclusively religious environments. The iconography shows up in a variety of representations of Jesus in a number of artistic programs in various physical contexts in Padua and beyond. For instance, the wound is displayed through a hole in Jesus’ garment in a detail of the *Last Judgment* at the Camposanto in Pisa (fig. 14). On the wall of the Camposanto, in an enclosed burial ground adjacent to the Pisa Cathedral, the gigantic figures of Mary and Jesus are shown seated next to each other at the same elevation, each within identical joined mandorlas. In strikingly similar poses Mary touches her (covered) right breast in a gesture reminiscent of Jesus in the *Saviour*, while Jesus, with his right hand raised, reveals the wound in a similar way to earlier depictions of the wound on Francis. Although his attribution is somewhat controversial, Maginnis argues that this image is by Francesco Traini and dates it from the mid- to late- 1330s.<sup>30</sup> Maginnis suggests that the significance of the *Last Judgement* and the other images at the Camposanto is probably connected with Dominican thought and the Camposanto’s purpose as a burial ground.<sup>31</sup> The

<sup>29</sup>G. Canova, *La Miniatura veneta del Trecento tra Padova and Venezia*, in *La pittura nel Veneto*, Tomo Secondo, ed. M. Lucco, Giunta Regionale del Veneto, 1992, pp. 383-408, pp. 383-84, plate 496.

<sup>30</sup>H. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation*, University Park, 1997, pp.141-42.

<sup>31</sup>H. Maginnis, ed. *Francesco Traini*, Washington, 1983, p. xxi.

validation of the wound iconography here in a Dominican environment suggests the symbol's relevance to an expanding variety of environments.

As the artists who originally worked on the Camposanto paintings were probably trained in Florence and Siena, it seems likely that this example of the wound symbol arose from Sieneese or Florentine versions of the iconography. Millard Meiss, for instance, claims that Traini's style demonstrates stylistic characteristics of the schools of Florence and Siena.<sup>32</sup> Smart writes too, that most of the artists commissioned to decorate the Camposanto must have originally come from, or at least were trained in, Florence. He also points to the Venetian native Antonio Veneziano, who was eventually employed on the Camposanto frescoes after he studied with Taddeo Gaddi in Florence.

Smart observes the difference as well between Jesus' stern demeanor in the Camposanto image, and the representation of a kinder Jesus in the *Last Judgement* in the Arena chapel. The depiction of Jesus in Padua seems to be more loving and peaceful, and comparable to Julian of Norwich's conception of God, blurring the boundaries between genders. Smart notices that in the Camposanto fresco, Jesus conveys only "condemnation", while in the Padua painting, Jesus rejects with one hand but welcomes with the other. In the Camposanto *Last Judgement* the separation between genders is made more clear in the emotions visually expressed by the figures; as Smart observes, Mary gazes toward the condemned souls with "gentler mien" than Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

It is imperative to state as well that in significant ways the Camposanto painting seems to allude to a societal concentration on relationships of power between women and men. To assist in explaining society's changing ideas concerning gender and sex, it is

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<sup>32</sup>M. Meiss, *Francesco Traini*, pp. 29-33.

<sup>33</sup>Smart, *Dawn of Italian Painting*, p. 117.

helpful to consider that the *Last Judgement* at the Camposanto is evocative of a particular type of compositional model known as the Triumph of the Virgin. As is noticeable with the *Last Judgement* in the Camposanto frescoes, in compositions recognized as the Triumph of the Virgin, the focus is on the equal elevation of Mary and Jesus. This model emerged in France during the late twelfth century, and continued across Europe through the fifteenth centuries. Gold explains that in this type of Marian imagery the composition shows Mary and Jesus as co-rulers of heaven. For instance, the symmetry between the two sculpted figures of Mary and Jesus in an early *Triumph of the Virgin* at Senlis in France suggests a “mutuality of power” as well the “equality of lovers”.<sup>34</sup> Gold suggests that the proliferation of images like this in depictions of Mary does not represent either a positive or negative attitude toward women; rather, it shows a preoccupation with working out an understanding of the relationship between male and female.<sup>35</sup> Even so, Gold states, with Mary shown in these images as heavenly companion to the adult Jesus, we see an additional “shift in emphasis” to a new “hierarchic equivalence” between Mary and Jesus.

As Gold observes, in liturgy related to the assumption of the Virgin, the bride is interpreted to refer allegorically to Mary *and* Jesus. In the Song of Songs Mary performs as both Jesus’s *queen* and *bride* and not his mother. Gold stresses that, as with other such imagery, the Triumph of the Virgin draws on the metaphors of both Jesus and Mary as bride and groom.<sup>36</sup> Gold makes a direct link between the Song of Songs and the Triumph of the Virgin by connecting the artistic evidence with verses from the Song of Songs being applied to Mary in the liturgy used in the feasts of her nativity and assumption.

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<sup>34</sup>Gold, *Lady and the Virgin*, pp. 51-65.

<sup>35</sup>Gold, *Lady and the Virgin*, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup>Gold, *Lady and the Virgin*, p. 67.

Gold writes that evidence from sermons on the assumption of the Virgin, in which verses from the Song are cited and the Virgin is called the bride as well as the mother of Jesus, demonstrate a significant relationship between the Song of Songs and the Triumph of the Virgin.<sup>37</sup> This notion, that both Mary and Jesus play both the bride and the groom in the Song of Songs, also points to affinities between Traini's *Last Judgement* and the blending of gender/s that I postulate for other visual images such as the *Saviour*.

Gold asserts that the compositional type known as the Triumph of the Virgin was a transitional step in the development during the early thirteenth century of the more popular model called the Coronation of the Virgin.<sup>38</sup> The evolution of the Triumph of the Virgin into the Coronation of the Virgin demonstrates the multiple meanings that can be "called forth" from one symbol. Both models relied on the metaphor of Mary as Jesus' bride, but the Coronation of the Virgin also developed the content of the relationship between Mary and Jesus by drawing on the analogy of bride and bridegroom.<sup>39</sup>

And, it is intriguing that the wound symbol shows up too, with the figure of Jesus, in relation to a particular *Coronation of the Virgin*, which was possibly commissioned by a female patron around 1344, for a convent in the vicinity of Padua (fig.15). The wound iconography appears in a fragment identified by King as a *Particular Judgment* that apparently is a detail from a *Coronation of the Virgin*, which has been attributed to Guariento. In fact, the next works that I will discuss concerning the wound symbol with Jesus are all related to paintings that appear to have been executed by this Paduan artist.

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<sup>37</sup>Meiss also observes possible references to the garden in the Song of Songs with certain fig.s in the Composanto paintings, Meiss, *Francesco Traini*, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup>Gold, *Lady and the Virgin*, p. 64.

<sup>39</sup>Gold, *Lady and the Virgin*, p. 67.

According to King, the *Coronation* by Guariento was perhaps partially financed by a third-order female secular, who is also depicted in the detail, kneeling to Jesus' right, and with the Virgin Mary holding her hand.<sup>40</sup> Although it appears that the original location of this work is somewhat uncertain, since King explains that the painting may have come from a parish convent in the Padua area, it seems likely that the *Coronation* was created for a female religious context.<sup>41</sup> I have included this extended discussion here because this example of the wound with Jesus in Guariento's *Coronation* demonstrates the continuing insertion of the iconography into various Marian as well as Passion imagery in the Padua area. The representation of the female donor here works, as well, to confirm women's active involvement at this time in the promotion and proliferation of the wound symbol within an all-female context.

It should also be mentioned that a lavish, nearly four metre high *Crucifixion* by Guariento was donated to a Franciscan church located on the central piazza in Bassano by a wealthy female patron. King makes the valuable observation, that in the *Crucifixion*, the donatrix Maria Bovolina is represented kneeling to the left, at the feet of Jesus in the "position of honour (on the right hand of Christ)" that is usually assumed by male donors.<sup>42</sup> In cases like these (as well as the *Saviour*), the women are represented too with the status of male donors. Their presence in this location in these images confirms that some women could occupy comparatively powerful positions within pre-modern cultural systems.

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<sup>40</sup>C. King, "Women as Patrons: nuns, widows and rulers," *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion: Volume II*, New Haven and London: 1995, pp. 243-266, pp. 262-263, Plate 313.

<sup>41</sup>King, "Women as Patrons", fn. 53,

<sup>42</sup>King, "Women as Patrons," pp. 247-48, Plate 296.

### The Importance of the Wound for Clare of Rimini

An unusual appearance of the wound iconography from around this time shows how the wound is associated with women's visionary encounters with Jesus in locations not far from Venice. The wound is discovered in a painting that records a Franciscan tertiary's vision of Jesus at Rimini (fig. 16). Dated to around 1340, this painting refers to an event described in the *Life of the Blessed Clare of Rimini*, also dated to the fourteenth century. Martin Davies explains that Clare identified so intensely with Jesus' passion, "she even had herself bound to a column on Good Friday".<sup>43</sup> Like many other female religious reformers who experienced a close bond with Jesus, Clare appears to have been a charismatic figure. In her study of Clare of Rimini, Patricia Ranft writes that she entered the Franciscan third order at the beginning of her religious life; when her mystical life deepened her apostolate increased. Numerous women turned to Clare for spiritual direction, and she built them a monastery.<sup>44</sup>

This representation of Clare's vision shows her kneeling, to Jesus' right, while with his left hand Jesus grasps the hole in his gown, to display the wound. The painting is one of two nearly identical, surviving altarpiece panels of Clare's vision.<sup>45</sup> In both images Jesus and John the Evangelist as well as several apostles appear to Clare. John offers Clare a book showing an inscription, which Davies translates as: "[Pax] mea[m] do v[obis]. Pax [meam]. relinquo vobi[s]". It is worth noting too that, unlike in the paintings, where Jesus is depicted standing, the author of Clare's biography records that in the vision Jesus was seated on a "wonderfully large throne of exceptional size which

<sup>43</sup>M. Davies, "Master of the Blessed Clare", *Italian Schools before 1400*, London, 2001, pp. 69-73.

<sup>44</sup>P. Ranft, *Women and Religious Life in Premodern Europe*, New York, 1996, p. 84.

<sup>45</sup>Davies, "Master of the Blessed Clare", p. 70; also see fig. 14.

was richly and beautifully ornamented”, reminding us of the fact that Quirizio’s image of Jesus is enthroned.<sup>46</sup>

This example of the wound iconography, as experienced in a vision by Clare of Rimini, demonstrates the significance of this imagery within a specific geographical area and within a particular female religious tradition. Whereas such iconography of the wound had been associated with Francis in visual representations of his body, now comparable representations of the wound became associated with Jesus’s body as experienced in a vision, suggesting a possible cross-fertilization of images and texts, a problem that I can only sketch in here.

It is when we begin to realize the possible connections between appearances of the wound iconography with Francis, Jesus, Mary, and the Song of Songs in Marian and Passion imagery throughout the region that we come closer to comprehending the meaning conveyed by the imagery and text in the *Saviour* and how important these cultural negotiations of potent symbols could be for religious people of the time. As we have seen, the iconography of the wound, which appears in the *Saviour* in the late fifteenth century, first emerged in Assisi around the mid-thirteenth century in pictorial representations of Francis in order to emphasize Francis’s parallelism to Jesus, as well as to have the Franciscan order validated by the pope.

What emerges from this analysis is that, from the beginning, the wound symbol seems to be associated with a re-evaluation of men and women’s positions in society and religion. The Franciscan nuns at Santa Chiara on Murano appear to have originated in a

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<sup>46</sup>Davies, “Master of the Blessed Clare”, p. 70.

tradition of women who slipped across gender boundaries in their desire to imitate and unite with Jesus.

### **Chapter Three: The Visual Evidence for Women's Religious Responses in Central and Northern Italy during the late Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries**

I will be suggesting in this chapter that the way Jesus offers the wound in the *Saviour* arose from the promotion of the female *imitatio Christi* by observant reformers near Venice, at a time when the Sienese Dominicans and the Camaldolese dominated artistic production in the Veneto area. As such, this historical perspective involves the reformers' representations of the bodily changes experienced by religious women in their intimate interactions with Jesus.

Near the end of the fourteenth century, the influential Dominican reformer Giovanni Dominici came to Venice from Siena in order to promote the canonization of Catherine of Siena and advance the movement for reform. Raymond of Capua was the founder of the Dominican observant reform movement and Giovanni Dominici was his disciple.<sup>1</sup> The art historical evidence indicates that a communication network existed between female Dominican illuminators from Corpus Christi in Venice, the Camaldolese monastery of San Michele at Murano, and Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence; the Tuscan artists, Andrea di Bartolo and his father, worked on commissions for both the Franciscans and Dominicans. The Dominican nuns from Corpus Christi apparently had access to a particular Venetian manuscript that I believe features a depiction of Catherine of Siena with her mouth against Jesus' upper-body wound. The copying of this manuscript by the sisters from Corpus Christi in Venice offers early evidence of painting by women in pre-modern Italy.

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<sup>1</sup>J. Pope-Hennessy, *Fra Angelico*, London, 1974, p. 1.

Later in this chapter, I also discuss several images that appear to address a similar eucharistic theme, comparable to that which is conveyed in the *Saviour*. In some of these representations, as in the *Saviour*, Jesus is depicted, instead of a priest, offering the communion wafer of the eucharist to a female beholder. Several contemporary scholars propose that such illustrations document a challenge to the authority of the priest in the eucharist. I argue instead that these images indicate that female religious experience was much richer and more distinctive than we currently understand—rather than moving immediately to assume that this phenomenon represents proof of greater female agency. Although there is no space to discuss this here, my research seemed to suggest that there might be significant differences between how religious wounding, as in the Doubting of Thomas, functioned within an all-male religious environment. My albeit brief survey of images of Jesus revealing his wound to Thomas indicated that this scene occurred more frequently in a male context, as opposed to the images of Jesus showing his wound to Mary Magdalene in a female context; of course, programmatic concerns have to be taken into careful consideration so my observation remains speculative. The main point here is that we need to be careful when we discuss the idea of female agency in analyzing the visual evidence. I think I would prefer to locate such choices of iconography within a gendered religious system based on a fluid and distinct sense of negotiated identity.

### **Female Visionary Experiences of the Wound in the Veneto and Central Italy**

A particularly interesting progression in the development of the wound iconography is its appearance in connection with the figure of Francis in the church of

San Francesco at Treviso (fig. 17). Attributed by many to Andrea di Bartolo from Siena, this work is of an uncertain date. Gilbert proposes a date around 1394, while Freuler argues the fresco was probably painted between 1424 and 1428, the year of Andrea di Bartolo's death.<sup>2</sup> Freuler compares this image to other representations of Francis by artists who influenced di Bartolo.<sup>3</sup> The Treviso painting of Francis depicts the wound, with obvious references to the portrayals of Francis by Giotto and Simone Martini in the San Francesco at Assisi. Marked similarities between the three separate examples of the wound indicate the extent of the assimilation of the wound motif into Franciscan iconography throughout northern and central Italy. The portrayal of Francis at Treviso clearly relies on artistic conventions used in the earliest visual representations of Francis, such as the Pescia altarpiece from 1235.

In the Treviso work, Francis directly faces the viewer, and holds a closed book under his left arm. However, as in Siena and with the two earlier examples at Assisi, in the Treviso painting Francis exposes the wound by grasping the left edge of the hole with his right hand. This gesture is also reproduced in Francis' pose with the sculpture at Siena. As well, the mandorla, or some might say, vulva/vagina-like shape of the opening is emphasized with a raised and highlighted fold, or roll of cloth around its outer edges. The attitude of drawing attention to the wound may be located within broader religious responses that indicate the wound's proliferation in diverse contexts.

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<sup>2</sup>In a 1994 essay (discussed in the next chapter), on the Treviso painting Gilbert dates this image to around 1394, C. Gilbert, "Tuscan Observants and Painters in Venice: ca. 1400", *Interpretazioni Veneziane*, ed. David Rosand, Venezia, 1984, pp. 109-120. In a later essay, Freuler argues the Saint Francis fresco was painted between 1424 and 1428, p. 580, G. Freuler, "Andrea di Bartolo, Fra Tommaso d'Antonio Caffarini, and Sienese Dominicans in Venice", *Art Bulletin*, v. 69 no. 4, pp. 570-586.

<sup>3</sup>Freuler, "Andrea di Bartolo...and Sienese Dominicans in Venice", p. 578. Freuler also notes the similarities to Simone Martini.

There is another notable depiction of the wound with respect to the *imitatio Christi*, which, like the *Saviour*, seems to transgress established standards for visual display of gender and religion on the body. The wound turns up in the fourteenth-century image of thirteenth-century mystic Margherita of Hungary, in the Dominican church of San Nicolò in Treviso (fig. 18). Like many religious women, who are now comparatively unknown, Margherita, like Francis, is reported to have received the stigmata.<sup>4</sup> This image of Margherita is attributed to Andrea's father, Bartolo di Fredi.

In order to determine why the wound suddenly appears on the representation of a Dominican female mystic by Andrea's father in Treviso, it is critical to examine the ways that the Dominican and the Camaldolese orders in Venice and Murano dominated artistic production in the region. It is likely that Giovanni Dominici supported Andrea's influence on Venetian culture. The way Jesus offers the wound in the *Saviour* appears to be indirectly related to Andrea di Bartolo's contribution to the promotion of the female *imitatio Christi* by reformers in and around Venice.

The evidence that Giovanni established and integrated Catherine of Siena's cult, as well as those of several other notable Dominican female mystics, into the religious life of the republic indicates the deep resonance of the influential reformer's ideas into the cultural fabric of Venice.<sup>5</sup> Creighton Gilbert stresses that papal validation of female stigmata and women's mystical experiences was critical to the campaign led by

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<sup>4</sup>D. Agasso and A. Borelli, "Margherita Saint of Hungary" *Famiglia Cristiani*, [http://www.santiebeati.it/search[3-Sep-2001]. McNamara states, "about three quarters of the hundreds of stigmatics who have multiplied since the early thirteenth century have been women", pp. 342-43, *Sisters in Arms*.

<sup>5</sup>Gilbert discloses as well that H van Os also proposes a connection between Andrea di Bartolo and the promotion of Catherine of Siena, "Tuscan Observants and Painters in Venice", p. 114.

Dominican reformers like Giovanni Dominici and Tommaso d'Antonio Caffarini to have the third order, in its new phase of strict observance, validated by the pope.<sup>6</sup>

Gaudenz Freuler argues that the Dominican observant Tommaso d'Antonio Caffarini, assisted by Bartolomeo Dominici, promoted Catherine of Siena, as well as several other important Dominican female saints, in the spiritual life of Venice. Tommaso Caffarini was deeply involved in the concerns of the Camaldolese monastery of Murano. He preached there on several occasions and copied the office of the stigmatization from the Camaldolese liturgy in the monastery's library.<sup>7</sup> Through the written word, artistic representation in addition to other religious forms and media, the Camaldolese and Dominican promotion of Catherine circulated widely into Venice's secular and religious communities. Tommaso encouraged Catherine's cult and preached frequently on the stigmata in Venice.<sup>8</sup> Annual celebrations were held, usually with processions of the Dominican saints, during which their relics were worshipped, while the visual arts reinforced the spoken word. Freuler states that this was the context for Caffarini's repeated references to the "sumptuous feasts" of Saint Catherine of Siena in Venetian convents, in particular at Corpus Christi. Caffarini apparently promoted Catherine through the production of texts and images, and his influence may be present in some of the images in Venice. Freuler writes also that it was Tommaso Caffarini who encouraged Raimondo da Capua to finish writing the life of Catherine, which Tommaso

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine's stigmatization occurred in 1376, "Tuscan Observants and Painters in Venice", p. 109, and she was canonized in 1461, p. 116. Giovanni was slightly older, but contemporary to Andrea, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup>Freuler, "Andrea di Bartolo...and Sieneese Dominicans in Venice", p. 580.

<sup>8</sup>Freuler, "Andrea di Bartolo...and Sieneese Dominicans in Venice", p. 575.

then translated into Italian.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Tommaso had many female saints' lives translated from Latin into Italian, which made them more generally accessible.

It is likely that many Franciscans in Venice were sympathetic to the Dominican reformers' campaign. According to the author of the necrology of *Corpus Domini*, while Giovanni Dominici was in Venice he encouraged a supportive, interactive relationship between the Dominicans and Franciscans, and even seems to have aligned himself with some fundamental elements of Franciscan thought. For example, Suor Bartolomea Riccoboni records that Giovanni Dominici "restored unity and peace" between the Franciscans and Dominicans. Bartolomea writes that Dominici arranged that all the Dominican friars would go as a group to hear the office and preach with the Franciscans on the feast of Saint Francis, and the Franciscans would respond "in kind" on the feast of Saint Dominic. In addition, Dominici adopted and popularized Franciscan meditation methods and published a commentary on the Song of Songs.<sup>10</sup> Such a reciprocation of devotional strategies, feast days and sermons between the two communities implies a newly-formed compatibility with respect to spiritual belief systems and values. It seems possible that the way Jesus offers the wound in the *Saviour* was influenced by such vigorous promotion of female mystics and women's position in religion by the observant reform movement in late-fourteenth century Venice. This evidence strongly suggests that the iconography of the wound, and the text from the Song of Songs, which appears in the *Saviour*, may correspond to devotional strategies promoted by Franciscans and observant reformers in Venice like Giovanni Dominici and Tommaso Caffarini.

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<sup>9</sup>Freuler, "Andrea di Bartolo...and Sieneese Dominicans in Venice", p. 572. The author consults various period texts.

<sup>10</sup>B. Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: the Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*, ed. D. Bornstein, pp. 87-88.

Gilbert writes that Andrea di Bartolo painted an altarpiece dedicated to Catherine of Siena for Corpus Christi that still survives at the Museo Vetrario on Murano. According to Gilbert, the altarpiece is the “earliest surviving altarpiece by far” dedicated to Catherine (fig. 19). Importantly, in relation to our study, it is also the “earliest representation of her stigmatization”.<sup>11</sup> Gilbert argues that Andrea di Bartolo and Giovanni Dominici were both involved with producing the altarpiece on Murano, one as the painter, the other as theological adviser.<sup>12</sup> Gilbert dates the Murano altarpiece to around 1394; he argues that Giovanni Dominici commissioned this work known as *Catherine of Siena and four Blessed Dominican Nuns* from Andrea di Bartolo. As Freuler and Gilbert both note, the theme of the stigmata is emphasized in the Murano altarpiece. Similar to Tommaso’s sermons, Andrea’s altarpiece motivated the nuns of Corpus Christi toward merging with Jesus through the “act of absorbed prayer”.<sup>13</sup> Freuler suggests it was Tommaso Caffarini’s role in promoting Catherine in these ways that clarifies the purpose behind Andrea di Bartolo’s altarpiece at Murano.<sup>14</sup> In the image, the three central women experience the utmost fulfillment of a mystical union with the crucified Jesus. Each of the women is shown in her cell, in a moment of “great spiritual exaltation” before a visual representation of Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Gilbert, “Tuscan Observants and Painters in Venice”, p. 116. Image is from *La Pittura nel Veneto*, Tomo Secondo, “Andrea di Bartolo altarpiece, Santa Caterina da Siena on Murano, Museo Vetrario, Tommaso d’Antonio, il convento delle domenicane del Corpus Domini, nel santuario veneziano di Santa Caterina”, colour plates 649-51.

<sup>12</sup>“Tuscan Observants and Painters in Venice”, p. 113. Catherine’s biographer Raymond of Capua sent Giovanni to Venice, in 1388.

<sup>13</sup>Freuler, “Andrea di Bartolo...and Sieneese Dominicans in Venice”, p. 575.

<sup>14</sup>Margarita da Citta di Castello and Vanna da Orvieto are depicted on either side of Catherine. These two female saints “also shared the mystery of the stigmata”, “Andrea di Bartolo...and Sieneese Dominicans in Venice”, p. 573.

<sup>15</sup>Freuler, “Andrea di Bartolo...and Sieneese Dominicans in Venice”, pp. 573-74.

The nuns at the convent of Corpus Christi in Venice illuminated manuscripts for Giovanni's reform activities. For example, a manuscript illumination from the Camaldolese monastery at Murano, which seems to contain a visual representation of Catherine of Siena's mouth on Jesus' wound was perhaps once on loan, as an exemplar to copy. Gilbert points out that an early-fifteenth century letter, which Giovanni Dominici wrote advising the nuns of Corpus Christi in Venice to borrow the graduals from San Michele, appears to be the "earliest record" of any kind of painting by women in pre-modern Italy.<sup>16</sup>

It is highly provocative that the particular manuscript illustration the nuns may have borrowed contains a small representation of Jesus standing and embracing a kneeling female figure with her mouth on his wound (fig. 20). Representing the Resurrection, and framed in an initial *R*, the page was created for an introit to the mass for Easter Sunday. This rare image, which perhaps refers to Catherine of Siena, serves to remind us that the work by Quirizio is not that peculiar, as it may refer to local knowledge of visions in which female believers participated in the sucking, kissing or entering of Jesus' wound. The representation and inclusion of a comparable event in the Venetian choir book provides further evidence pointing to the promotion of religious women's passionate relationships with Jesus, as well as experiences of the stigmata with respect to Catherine and other female mystics.

The fact that the letter from Giovanni Dominici highlights an early instance of female painters involved in this network also suggests that other religious women on Murano and in Venice may have participated in comparable artistic pursuits at the time.

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<sup>16</sup>Gilbert, "Tuscan Observants and Painters in Venice", p. 112.

We can only speculate whether any further liturgical texts, illuminated either by the Dominican nuns, or others, contained additional representations of such affective encounters between Jesus and Catherine and other religious women who were promoted by the reform movement in Venice.<sup>17</sup> It makes one wonder whether more depictions of the bodily expressions of female *imitatio Christi* were included in equivalent publications as well as other media and circulated throughout the reform movement's triangle. Similar to the eucharistic theme represented in the *Saviour*, it is important to stress as well that the manuscript page dated between 1392 and 1399 from the Camaldolese monastery on Murano, which the Corpus Christi nuns may have studied, was intended for use in celebrating the eucharist during the Easter season.<sup>18</sup>

The reformers' promotion of the female *imitatio Christi* in Venice seems important in relation to understanding the movement and symbolic meaning of the wound iconography. It seems reasonable to wonder whether the popularization in and around Venice during the late fourteenth century of women's affective experiences of the stigmata may be connected in art-historical and cultural ways to the representation of the wound in the *Saviour*. Familiarity with the idea of women's acquirement of the stigmata in intimate encounters with Jesus could have created a tradition that would be re-asserted less than one hundred years later on Murano by Quirizio da Murano.

Let me briefly turn now to consider the historical evidence for the devotional strategies employed by the sisters at Corpus Christi in Venice and which, in all probability, could have been practiced by Franciscan nuns on Murano. As the Blessed

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<sup>17</sup>For instance, along with Catherine of Siena and Kunigunde, Beata Joanna da Firenze and Beata Daniella da Orvieto are represented on the Murano altarpiece taking part in such an affective encounter with Jesus, Freuler, "Andrea Bartolo...and Sienese Dominicans in Venice," p. 574.

<sup>18</sup>G. Freuler, "Don Silvestro Dei Gherarducci" *Painting and Illumination in Early Renaissance Florence 1300-1450*. New York: 1994, pp. 124-176, pp. 155-56.

Margherita's biography has indicated, Dominican female observants, like Clare and her followers, imitated the physical suffering of Jesus through fasting, vigils and self-flagellation. It is clear that the Dominican nuns in the convent of Corpus Christi in Venice experienced such bodily expressions of longing for assimilation with Jesus as a tool in their religious devotions. In a translation of Riccoboni's fifteenth-century chronicle and necrology of Corpus Christi in Venice for example, Bornstein describes the nuns' intense devotion to the eucharist and "affective engagement" with the "person of Jesus" as a "child and spouse". Through "eager identification" with the passion of Jesus, the women experienced an inclination for visions and ascetic practices. These were aimed at "controlling and punishing the body through flagellation and renunciation of food and sleep" and at "turning the body to spiritual ends".<sup>19</sup>

In the chronicle of Corpus Christi, Bartolomea Riccoboni records that, "all day long there were women in ecstasy at all hours, now this one now that. When the chime sounded they could hardly tear themselves away from prayer to go take bodily food, but obedience constrained them". However, some ate nothing but "bread and the basics". The sisters at Corpus Christi were "well supplied" with hair shirts, chains and whips. In the evenings they arranged "to go off together in a group to beat themselves, and they scourged themselves with great shedding of blood".<sup>20</sup> Freuler also alludes to the lonely vigils endured by the nuns of Corpus Christi in their cells, as they aroused their fleshly desires toward a more fulfilling climax with Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Bornstein, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>20</sup>Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>21</sup>Lowe discloses that in the Benedictine convent of Le Murate in Florence, the refectory and the chapter room were where miscreant nuns were "publicly punished in front of their peers, *Nun's Chronicles and Convent Culture*, pp. 136-37.

Lewis reminds us that accounts of visions affected more than the visionaries who endured them. It is clear that many subsequent visions arose from these spiritual methods and visions, which worked to advance the popularity of these female religious. Medieval devotion frequently concentrated on the recounting of stories of intimate encounters with Mary and Jesus. In the influential *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ*, for instance, the Franciscan female believer is admonished by the male writer to insert herself as an “observer and actor” in the scene and to participate in a conversation with the main characters.<sup>22</sup> This possibility of a reciprocal relationship between the reader/believer and the religious model is a significant aspect of meditation practice that models how ordinary people could aspire to the experiences of visionaries.

### **The Wound on the Move Again**

We will now discuss representations of Jesus and Francis, some with the wound iconography, which Gilbert postulates may have been inspired by earlier cell paintings made by Andrea di Bartolo for Dominican nuns in Venice. Around the mid-fifteenth century, an image similar in the way Jesus offers the wound in the *Saviour* was produced for an all-male context in Florence, in Dominican paintings by Fra Angelico and his assistants, especially in themes concerning the Passion and Resurrection. The spiritual purpose of the San Marco images also seems to highlight a similar religious practice we have been tracking. Hood’s observation that Angelico intended the frescoes as devotional devices that could assist the men in identifying with the fleshly sufferings of

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<sup>22</sup>Lewis, “The Wound in Christ’s Side”, p. 209.

Jesus points to a continuity of ideas about the bodily expression of male and female Franciscans and Dominicans in Venice, Florence, Siena and Fiesole which are connected to the observant reformers' activities. The paintings serve as "devices whereby the friar might recall the entire liturgical panoply surrounding the Passion".<sup>23</sup>

In an image of *Three Marys at the Tomb*, from the cleric's dormitory in the east corridor at San Marco, Jesus is depicted with similar wound iconography to that seen in the *Saviour* (fig. 21). In the depiction of the *Noli Me Tangere* from Cell One at San Marco in Florence, the wound is shown in a manner that closely resembles its appearance in Quirizio's altarpiece of the *Saviour* (fig 22).<sup>24</sup>

Around 1440 as well, the symbol of the wound in representations of Francis appeared in Dominican imagery for the first time at San Marco. It is important to stress, that this mid-fifteenth century depiction of the wound with Francis, at this monastery in Florence, could be one of the earliest representations of Francis with the wound within a Dominican context. In the chapter room at San Marco in Florence in the *Crucifixion*, also attributed to Fra Angelico, a kneeling Francis displays the wound, supporting the notion of shared devotional strategies between the Franciscans and Dominicans (fig. 23).<sup>25</sup> Like many other images in this analysis, this representation of the wound on Francis's body is related to the stimulation of bodily expression in religion as a device to motivate the monks toward a sensual encounter with Jesus, giving us pause to consider how the wound imagery might have worked for male experience in pre-modern Italy.

<sup>23</sup>Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, pp. 221-24.

<sup>24</sup>Pope-Hennessy, *Fra Angelico*, Plate 77.

<sup>25</sup>Pope-Hennessy, *Fra Angelico*, p. 21; image from Plate 75.

## Women's Agency and the Manipulation of Religious Symbols

I will now discuss a mid-fifteenth image of the wound executed by a woman, who, in this case, was an observant Franciscan (fig. 24). Comparable to numerous images depicting the wound with Jesus, Wood states that this "blessing Christ" originates from icons of the Pantocrator.<sup>26</sup> It is obvious too that in many ways this composition conforms to the iconographic model we have been tracking. It might even be said that with its small hands, rounded shoulders and face, this representation of Jesus could be viewed as 'feminine'. Catherine of Bologna, the writer, painter, and musician who created this painting of Jesus, relied on imagery from the Song of Songs; her image evokes the imagery and text that appears in the *Saviour*. Using descriptions of love and longing from the Song, Catherine was able to convey the concept of transubstantiation in the eucharist and a sensual and emotional interaction with the divine. It could be assumed that this was a mark of exceptional agency, as has occurred in some readings of female visionaries. As stated above, I prefer to explore her responses here for what they tell us about a distinctive female religious experience.

For example, in her treatise, Catherine of Bologna remembers that when she was "beset by terrible doubts" about the "divine presence in the Eucharist", she was "blessed with a visitation" from Jesus, who illuminated the doctrine of transubstantiation for her. In addition, in one of her poems, Catherine "directs" the "yearning bride's love" to the "drinking and eating of Christ's sufferings as embodied in the Eucharist". According to Woods, Catherine's "transformation" of "desire into its object" is critical. Catherine

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<sup>26</sup>J. Wood, *Women, Art, and Spirituality: The Poor Clares of Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 130.

directs the viewers of her paintings and the readers of her texts to “self-knowledge, to opening their souls to grace and to contemplation of the divine” through an “affective piety” that *feels* its way, sensually and spiritually, toward God.<sup>27</sup>

Catherine’s example reminds us of another late-fifteenth-century female Franciscan who, some scholars believe, circumvented the power of the priest when she explored other “possibilities” of the eucharist. Colette of Corbie was a leading reformer who, like many religious women we have studied, worked for strict observance, and as Bynum writes, even engaged in papal politics. Colette experienced eucharistic ecstasies in her encounters with Jesus and received the stigmata too.<sup>28</sup> She frequently saw Jesus in the elevation of the host. Sometimes out of “reverence and frenzy,” she was almost unable to swallow the communion wafer. She could not eat after mass and often remained enthralled in ecstasy for many hours.

If the priest was careless in his “eucharistic duties”, Colette, like Catherine of Siena, was able to receive the communion wine and wafer personally from Jesus. As Bynum writes:

Once, when the priest filled the chalice with water by mistake, she knew that God was not present at the moment of consecration. On another occasion when the priest forgot to consecrate a host for her, Christ brought her the wafer with his own hand.<sup>29</sup>

An image of Colette showing Jesus performing this act appears in a fifteenth-century manuscript of Colette’s life made for Margaret of York, Charles the Bold’s wife. In this miniature, dated to roughly the same time as the *Saviour*, between 1468 and 1477, Jesus

<sup>27</sup>Wood, *Women, Art and Spirituality*, p. 140.

<sup>28</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 138-9; she refers to Peter of Vaux, “Life of Colette”, AASS March, vol. 1, Paris: 1865, pp. 538-88.

<sup>29</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 139.

is shown in a garment resembling the gown he wears in the *Saviour*, as he offers the host to the kneeling Colette (fig. 25).<sup>30</sup> Bynum observes here that the visual representation of such an “immediate and individual” relationship between God and the soul appears to “triumph over clerical authority”, but I would caution against this kind of reading of women’s agency.<sup>31</sup> For many, Colette’s experience would be perceived as a challenge to the authority of the priest. I reiterate that the illustration may simply depict the gendered response by a community of religious women whose identity was not constructed with regard to men. The fact that a representation of Jesus offering the communion wafer was included in a manuscript produced for a wealthy French noblewoman suggests that such images publicizing Colette’s autonomy were not prohibited, but were likely highly valued in the social spheres that Margaret of York or Kunigunde of Prague traveled. It is even possible to venture that Margaret of York may have been involved, like Julian of Norwich, in a religious sub-culture of women developing their own sense of a separately gendered identity. At any rate, it should be clear, that in the circumstances for which they were made, images like Margaret’s miniature and the *Saviour* altarpiece document religious women’s intimate connection with and likeness to Jesus. Such images affirm the vital role of the female *imitatio Christi* in religious and secular life.

In the next chapter we will observe that before stricter enforcement of enclosure laws in the early sixteenth century, nuns, especially in Venice, continued to maintain a visible and industrious presence. During the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the vigorous promotion of sensual encounters with Jesus through spiritual approaches like visual interaction with his wounds, self-flagellation, eyewitness meditation, women’s

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<sup>30</sup>Pearson, *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art*, Figure 5, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup>Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 139.

experiences of the stigmata, and reliance on biblical analogies like the Song of Songs, all point to the visibility and importance in Venice of women's religious expression.

## **Chapter Four: Reading the Saviour Altarpiece: The State of Clausura, Religious Vision and Artistic Expression**

I would now like to explore some additional frames of reference that I think help us to see the altarpiece as it might have been experienced by its contemporary audience, as well as helping us to reflect on how we read the image. To that end, I think it is essential to understand the system of clausura and the possible ways it impacted on the nuns who were the intended audience for the work.

### **Living as an Enclosed Nun in Venice**

Religious historian Elizabeth Makowski makes clear that during the later medieval period stricter enclosure laws worked to restrict religious women's lives in new ways.<sup>1</sup> The grouping of women by sexual status and their confinement in special institutions which took place in this period was part of an encompassing project to contain social chaos by reordering public space.<sup>2</sup> Women's submission to enclosure was meant to eliminate the 'scandalously' worldly conduct of some nuns and their extravagant manifestations of faith.<sup>3</sup> As Wimmers has suggested, any specific reading of a work is bound or circumscribed by the frames of reference in control at that time, and in this regard, I argue that exploring fully the conditions of enclosed convent life in Venice, even when it extends to a later period, is relevant background information because it

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<sup>1</sup>E. Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculoso and its Commentators 1298-1545*, Washington, 1997, pp. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, p. 119.

reminds us of how nuns had to continually negotiate the particular circumstances that inhered in their communal lives.<sup>4</sup>

Venice was totally transformed during the early sixteenth century when religious women, because of their gender status, were increasingly cut off from the larger society and put out of sight into institutions. The advancement of enclosure laws made Venetian nuns invisible to those beyond convent walls, but as well during the sixteenth century, nuns previously associated with Santa Chiara on Murano were rebuked for performing as men in plays in order to attract the female gaze. Church records indicate that in Venice, transgressions of religious authority frequently involved escalating perceptions of female same-sex desire within convents. Moreover, after a long struggle for dominance between conventual and observant Franciscans, conventual Franciscans were excluded from the Franciscan order in 1517, after which, two years later, the Venetian state took action to suppress and reform the conventual houses. Just after the *Saviour* altarpiece was created, the religious environment for women was altered profoundly, such that the initial impetus for the artistic commission may have been changed in ways that we must acknowledge.

Enclosing nuns within convent walls had originally begun with the writing of a Rule for the Poor Clares in the thirteenth century; Urban IV reiterated the importance of clausura in 1263. The continued implementation of these ideas in the bull *Periculoso* by Pope Boniface VIII in 1298 was also significantly affected by the earlier rule of the Clares. McNamara states that this bull gave the pope the power to appoint friars as confessors to the nuns.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it extended the legislation to enforce the enclosure of religious women of every order throughout the Latin Church. Although religious men

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<sup>4</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. xxi.

<sup>5</sup>McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, p. 310.

had long enjoyed greater liberty in relation to observing the rules of enclosure, the reinforcement of enclosure laws at a time “when the friars moved as Jesus had” in the bustle of the city only accentuated the “anachronistic distinctiveness” of religious women in the pre-modern period.<sup>6</sup>

Makowski claims that, when fourteenth-century synods legislated on the enclosure of nuns they continued to refer to *Periculoso*, but strengthened the decree by exacting various penalties for violation.<sup>7</sup> For example, in 1320 the synod of Perugia commanded that “any cleric, religious, or layman who entered a convent of nuns, contrary to the constitution of the Lord Pope and without special license of the bishop, should be excommunicated”.<sup>8</sup> Weaver, who focuses on Tuscan convent drama, notes religious women who before had been a “common sight” now became visible only to the very few. During the early-modern period such enclosure laws transformed an enormous number of female monastics into an invisible yet active presence.<sup>9</sup> However, in relation to conditions for the Franciscan nuns at Santa Chiara, Lowe points out that it is now clear the papal bull was never fully implemented in Venice.<sup>10</sup>

The process of observant reform in Venice was peculiar to the city because, unlike other places in Italy, *clausura* laws were not strictly enforced until the early-sixteenth century when the long, bitter conflict between conventual and observant reformers finally came to a head. For example, when Lorenzo Giustiniani tried to

<sup>6</sup>Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup>Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>8</sup>Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women*, pp. 46-47. We may also consider the evidence of how the architectural environment can impact on our understanding of the context for members of this female community. Makowski writes that the rule deals in “minute detail with the precautions to be taken to ensure the observance of passive as well as active enclosure within each monastery—the material or physical aspects of enclosure, pp. 46-47.

<sup>9</sup>E. Weaver, “The Convent Wall in Tuscan Convent Drama”, *Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early-modern Europe*, ed. C. Monson, Ann Arbor, 1992, pp. 73-86, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup>Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, p. 185.

enforce reform on the convent of Le Vergini in 1448, Pope Nicholas V supported the abbess' appeal and told the city's patriarch not to interfere in the government of the convent.<sup>11</sup> While bishops and civic authorities continued to defend their frequent interference in convent affairs by accusing the nuns under their control of "constant violations" of monastic discipline, it was not until after 1510, when relations between city officials and the papacy improved, that convent reform in Venice became more vigorous, and finally most religious women were enclosed.<sup>12</sup>

According to Sperling, with the advancement of enclosure in the early sixteenth century, the power of religious women in Venice was dramatically reduced. Enforcement of clausura curtailed the decision-making authority of abbesses and severely reduced nuns' autonomy in convent administration. Through the process of enclosure, nuns were separated from powerful friends and relatives in order to be reverted to collective self-government under the instruction of civic authorities and local bishops. The elimination of life-long terms for abbesses in favour of triennial elections that usually came with reform was intended to keep the abbess's relatives from controlling the administration of the convent.<sup>13</sup> There could be no better illustration of women's loss of power and representation in religion than the waning support for the authority of religious women's miracles and visions. As Judith Brown explains, from the sixteenth century on, the Church actively discouraged this popular belief system.<sup>14</sup> Sperling states too that for lay and religious authorities alike, it became imperative to purge the public world of

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<sup>11</sup>The convent's chronicle *Le Vergini* states that the house was historically linked with the convent of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, p. 104.

<sup>12</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, pp. 115-116, and Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, pp. 193-94.

<sup>13</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, pp. 170-78.

<sup>14</sup>J. Brown, *Immodest Acts: the Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, New York, 1986, pp. 51-52, 105.

“‘wayward nuns’, miracle-working mystics and prophetesses”.<sup>15</sup> In the end, what is being brought to our attention by these authors is a denouncement by sixteenth-century Church and state officials of religious women’s relatively powerful identity and position in Venice.

Goffen states that during the late fifteenth century it was common for the supporters of an observant group to take over a conventual house by “ousting” the original inhabitants. Sixtus IV, who himself was a conventual, tried to prevent such evictions in his 1474 bull *Dum singulos*, which prohibited the observants from dispossessing the conventuals and appropriating their houses. But the 1474 bull did not solve the dispute over houses that existed between the conventuals and the observants. Finally in 1517, as the result of a papal bull, the conventuals were completely excluded from the Franciscan order, while the Franciscan observants and other reformed groups became known as the “Order of the Friars Minor”. Two years later in Venice, an agreement between the doge and the Council of Ten in Venice also worked to reform and suppress the conventual houses.<sup>16</sup>

The brutal overthrow of the conventual nuns at the Augustinian convent of Le Vergini in 1519 provides a disturbing example of the way reform was thrust upon Venetian female religious houses that had formerly been conventional. The convent had been the “least restricted” house in Venice before the observant rule was strictly enforced by the city’s doge, who had the support of papal and civic authorities.<sup>17</sup> Lowe stresses that the canonesses at Le Vergini were completely opposed to the imposition of observance. The woman who wrote the chronicle of *Le Vergini* viewed observant reform

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<sup>15</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup>Goffen, *Piety and Patronage in Renaissance Venice*, pp. 80-83.

<sup>17</sup>Lowe, *Nun’s Chronicles and Convent Culture*, p. 192.

as a “consciously misogynistic” attack on women. Le Vergini, however, was “literally invaded” by an “army” of government officials, lawyers, notaries and workmen, who broke through seven locked gates and doors, and assaulted the convent. Builders divided the convent in two, erecting an interior brick wall in order to create a separate living space for a group of observant Augustinian nuns sent from S. Giustina to Le Vergini in order to administer reform.<sup>18</sup> Antonio Contarini then waited for the conventuals who were walled up in half of their former space to literally “die out”. The Venetian patriarch supported the observant nuns at Le Vergini with every opportunity, while obstructing control of property and financial support and not permitting enough food to be given to the remaining conventual members, who continued to live on in their partitioned space.<sup>19</sup> Other religious women across Venice were gradually forced in this way by stricter enclosure laws to stay within convent walls, as reformers in Venice repeatedly tried to subjugate female religious communities to total enclosure.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, before the sixteenth century, the majority of the female population resided in Venetian convents, and members appear to have perhaps enjoyed more agency over their lives than many secular women.<sup>21</sup> Humfrey states that in 1493 Venice had thirty-one churches for nuns, which was more than any other Christian city except Rome.<sup>22</sup> Venetian convents were famous for their relaxed discipline—they were often compared to public bordellos. Laven records that the pope viewed them as decadent and

<sup>18</sup>Lowe, *Nun's Chronicles and Convent Culture*, pp. 193-95.

<sup>19</sup>Lowe, *Nun's Chronicles and Convent Culture*, p. 197.

<sup>20</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>21</sup>A complex network of relationships existed between the city of Venice and its convents. Powerful kinship lines between aristocratic nuns and their family members in Venice gave the nuns political influence outside the convent. Within the convent's walls, nuns held elections as well as managed their communities and extensive lands, *Virgins of Venice*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>22</sup>P. Humfrey, *Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, New Haven and London, 1993, p. 21.

corrupt.<sup>23</sup> Venetian nuns were known to exchange kisses with prostitutes, and talk and laugh with them too.<sup>24</sup> Nuns often shared cells with other nuns, and hosted overnight guests.<sup>25</sup> The conventual chronicler at Le Vergini recalls that, until the imposition of observance, the sisters pursued a number of secular interests and sometimes left the convent.<sup>26</sup> Beginning in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, observant reformers in Venice repeatedly tried to subjugate female religious communities to rigid enclosure, such that religious women were gradually forced to stay within convent walls.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to state, that during the late 1480s, just after the *Saviour* was painted, nuns from Santa Chiara on Murano were distinguished by their irreproachable standing in the city. For example, Goffen notes that in 1489 city officials entrusted a group of nuns from Santa Chiara on Murano to manage the newly constructed church of the Miracoli in Venice. Apparently, the Clarissans from Murano had a reputation for earnest religious commitment, being viewed as “worthy” and often receiving lay support.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, just a few years later, during the early sixteenth century, while observant nuns worked at overturning long-established hierarchies of power in Venetian conventual convents, the evidence indicates that the way city and Church officials looked at certain nuns from Santa Chiara had shifted in radical ways. A protest visit made to the doge in Venice in 1521 is related to the struggle between the observants and conventuals by

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<sup>23</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, p. xxiv.

<sup>24</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, pp. 132-135.

<sup>25</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup>Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>28</sup>Goffen, *Piety and Patronage in Renaissance Venice*, p. 149.

groups of Franciscan nuns from Santa Chiara and Santa Maria dei Miracoli. Anzola Boldù, the one-hundred-and six-year-old conventual abbess from Santa Chiara, appealed to the doge and charged that the reforms which he and the observants had recently introduced, were causing the nuns of Santa Chiara to starve to death. Six other conventual nuns and their families, as well as a male Franciscan, accompanied the elderly abbess. The group came to Antonio Contarini to protest that the administration of Santa Chiara had been taken from them and given to a group of women from the convents of Santa Croce and Santa Maria dei Miracoli. This action was part of a reform agenda brought about by the doge, who, as Laven writes, “‘bussed’ nuns between the model observant convents of the city and those communities known as conventuals, which were considered lax and in need of reform”.<sup>29</sup>

Nuns and supporters from four more convents soon joined the protestors from Santa Chiara, but Contarini rebuked the nuns for leaving their convents and threatened them with excommunication. Eventually, the rebellious nuns broke down the wall of a convent grain storage area in an attempt to regain control of their food supply. Goffen observes that with many incidents like this, the conventual Franciscan nuns obviously had no future in Venice, but the conventuals continued to display stubborn resistance when they were entreated to join the observants. When a certain abbess was asked whether her community wanted to join the observants, she and the other nuns responded “that in no way did they wish to make themselves Observants”.<sup>30</sup> Again in the later sixteenth century, Sperling reports that in 1594 two Franciscan convents in Venice

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<sup>29</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup>Goffen, *Piety and Patronage in Renaissance Venice*, p. 82.

continued to protest their “loss of power”.<sup>31</sup> In this instance the abbesses and vicars of the convents were imprisoned after the nuns went on “clausura strike”. The dissidents tore down the wall of the cloister, entered the exterior churches, opened the doors, and stayed there for a whole day, walking about the church, and returned to their seclusion only after the government threatened them.<sup>32</sup>

All of the foregoing discussion on sixteenth-century conditions provides an interesting contrast to an earlier period for which the evidence is lost—but which prompts us to question what lies behind the creation of the altarpiece of the *Saviour*? While this evidence from the sixteenth century cannot give us a complete picture of the convent on Murano during Quirizio’s time, it is important to consider that the *Saviour* must have been painted within Anzola Boldù’s lifetime. It is quite likely that the conventual abbess who is recorded as protesting in 1521 was living at Santa Chiara during the 1460s and 1470s when Quirizio da Murano has been reported as active. In 1489, when the church of the Miracoli was entrusted by city officials into the care of Santa Chiara nuns from Murano, Boldù would have been over seventy, but as her strong resolve and long life indicates, probably very much alive. It is clear that this elderly nun lived through, and was affected by changing cultural perspectives toward religious women in Venice that were brought about by stricter enclosure laws, and the encroachment of observant reform.

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<sup>31</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, p. xvi.

<sup>32</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, p. 129. Sperling quotes a 1594 letter of Monsignor Taverna, 21 October 1594, AV, Nunziature di Venezia, reg. 30, c. 292v.

### Controlling the Female Body: The Power of the Gaze

In response to existing tensions in the possibility and impossibility of women's sexual expression in pre-modern religion, it is telling, as Sperling has recorded, that in Venetian convents, transgressions of church authority primarily involved the neglect of chastity.<sup>33</sup> It is apparent that in order for the nuns' clausura and virginity to remain intact, affective and sensual relations with persons both outside and *inside* the convent were prohibited. As Sperling informs the reader, affairs between nuns were potentially more disruptive of convent discipline than affairs with men, sodomitic or not, because they were impossible for outside authorities to monitor and hence control. An obvious but often overlooked reality of clausura was that "perfect seclusion was a guarantor of chastity only given the premise of a heterosexual scenario".<sup>34</sup> But when viewed within the framework of same-sex desire, by definition, clausura contained what is described as the potential for the catastrophic reversal of its intended purpose.

Like Sperling, Laven also finds it difficult to understand how external authorities could have hoped to suppress the "fondness of nuns for one another". She states that chastity *within* the convent was one of the hardest aspects of women's communal religious life to enforce.<sup>35</sup> As a result, while stricter enclosure laws made the bodies of nuns more physically invisible to the secular world, the sexual behavior of nuns within convent walls was more acutely scrutinized by male church authorities. The complete insistence on enclosure and the zealous attention devoted to employing it was aimed at sealing nuns in a vacuum cut off from human relations. Enclosure meant severing all

<sup>33</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>34</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, pp. 161-62.

<sup>35</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, pp. 103-104.

personal bonds of affection that obstructed devotion to the religious life. Sperling points out that, as this theme was common in popular songs and literature, the public was well aware of the sorrow and distress of involuntary nuns.<sup>36</sup> As Laven observes, because intimate relationships were prohibited, nuns' roles as brides of Jesus gave religious women the only "suitable outlet" for their "unspent emotions".<sup>37</sup>

To convince the reader of the increasing attention paid by outside authorities to same-sex relationships within the convent, Sperling draws our attention to the common belief in the power of the gaze and its application in relation to visual attraction between religious women. She points out, for example, that in a text on Church law and monastic communities, Francesco Pellizzari, maintained, "like everybody else at the time," that "sensual" desires came before, but were "aroused" by "visual attraction". It was assumed that nuns who showed their legs in stretch pants or exposed their breasts with low necklines and transparent veils could also incite women's desire for each other and progress to erotic relationships. For these reasons nuns were forbidden to participate in any form of 'gazing'. In particular, Sperling records that, "posing in plays and other performances was as much of a temptation for nuns as watching them".<sup>38</sup>

In Venice, as Sperling shows, the most intensive phase of the clausura reform movement occurred between 1580 and 1620 with changes to methods of convent inspection, when surveillance systems became more institutionalized.<sup>39</sup> Again, as it originates from a later time period, this evidence helps us compare to some degree the

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<sup>36</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, p. 103.

<sup>38</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, p.162. Francesco Pellizzari was the author of *Manuale Regularium*, a compilation of church law in relation to monastic communities, pp. 133-34.

<sup>39</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, pp. 141-142.

relatively more independent status of late-fifteenth century nuns. Lowe observes that a visitation by Cardinal Lorenzo Priuli at Le Vergini in Venice in 1596 stresses different concerns and a different methodology in the new, more harrowing convent inspection process. The examination took place over two separate days, with a ten-day interval between the two parts of the inquisition. The first phase of the investigation was visual. Male church authorities spent the first day visually inspecting the church, its altars, balconies and grates, as well as under the nuns' bed. On the second day of the procedure violations of the rule were exposed through private interrogations of individual nuns. Also, with the new monitoring system, answers by nuns in interrogations were not written as before, but orally transmitted. In addition, before the convent inspection began, instead of the traditional practice of the abbess and nuns greeting the archbishop at the convent gate, the convent confessor, chaplain and other priests met the archbishop.<sup>40</sup>

Further, it is fascinating to observe that late-sixteenth century convent records from the church of the Miracoli reflect these cultural changes in attitude toward nuns' distinctive expressions of gender and sex. For example, nuns from the same church, which had been previously revered for its piety, had been reprimanded for performing in plays in which they cross-dressed as male characters. The account states,

...sometimes the nuns sing profane songs; and they play guitar and the lute, and they dress up as men in order to put on plays. It is ordered that they should not wear secular clothes when they perform plays.<sup>41</sup>

Laven includes an excerpt from *Codice Cicogna*, in Venice, dated 1593, January fifteenth, discussing the plays performed customarily by the nuns. The text sternly exhorts nuns to abstain completely from putting on plays, "but if they have to admit them

<sup>40</sup>Lowe, *Nun's Chronicles and Convent Culture*, pp. 190-92.

<sup>41</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, p. 140.

for honest recreation, we shall tolerate them, so long as they are stories from holy scripture, or from the lives of the saints".<sup>42</sup> The *Codice* commands that it is not "permissible to wear masks or beards, under pain of the suspension of the abbess for one year".<sup>43</sup> Because earlier evidence of punishment for cross-dressing in plays is lacking, the reader is left to wonder whether the Church previously condoned such performances of male gender and sex on religious female bodies.

Pietro Bembo's fiction about a young novice's experience in a Venetian convent is especially enlightening in relation to the Venetian secular community's detailed suspicions about female-female desire within the city's all-female religious houses. In this sixteenth-century satire, the novice watches group sex in the abbess's quarters, and sees erotic art on the walls and a basket full of dildos made from Murano glass.<sup>44</sup> By the early seventeenth century "particular friendships" of nuns both in and outside the convent are noted in Venetian convent magistrate's records, drawing attention to the growing cultural perceptibility of the possibility of female homosexual desire. For example, the confessor to the nuns at Santa Marta writes that he "always" persuaded the nuns to abandon female same-sex relationships. This heightened awareness of female-female desire in religious and secular circles in Venice can be compared to Traub's observations on the rising cultural visibility of female homoeroticism in early-modern England, and it also reminds us of the ways in which societal forces sought to control the often unruly female body.

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<sup>42</sup>The author cites Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venezia, *Cod. Cic.* 2570, pp. 182-83, 1593, January fifteenth. Laven also refers to A. Grimani, *Constitutioni*, cap. XLVIII, *Virgins of Venice*, p. 230.

<sup>43</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, p. 230.

<sup>44</sup>Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, p. 146, footnote 9, refers to Archivio della Curia Patriarcale di Venezia, *Vis. Past.*, Priuli, 1592-96, Miracoli, 1595, fo. 369r.

## The Role of Visual Expression in the *Saviour* Altarpiece

From an art-historical viewpoint, the artistic conventions exhibited in the *Saviour* are the direct result of new developments in Venetian devotional art that were designed to encourage the idea of penetration or 'seeing through'. Related to the employment of such innovative devices, certain elements in the *Saviour* reflect early-modern artistic inquiries into the properties of sight and experimentations with one-point perspective. We discover that even the frame that once contained the *Saviour* relies on illusionistic architectural ornament intended to emphasize perspective and the concept of looking through.

The artistic strategies evident in the *Saviour* and contemporaneous devotional art were intended to stimulate a physiological and affective response in the viewer. In *Icon to Narrative*, Ringbom, for example, explores the veneration of images derived from the Byzantine icon, which evoked intense, emotional and psychological experiences throughout medieval- and early-modern Europe. The author especially focuses on artistic methods apparent in paintings by Roger van der Weyden, Mantegna, Antonello and Giovanni Bellini.<sup>45</sup> He comments that images of this type are often referred to as "miraculous pictures".<sup>46</sup>

Humfrey and Ringbom identify certain characteristics that are peculiar to altarpieces and devotional images, which it can be argued also pertain to the *Saviour*. As Humfrey states, the boundary between icon and narrative painting is not always distinctly

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<sup>45</sup>Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, pp. 72-90.

<sup>46</sup>Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, p. 29.

defined.<sup>47</sup> Ringbom observes that altarpieces and devotional paintings are both cult images, and that the “motifs” used in altarpieces are employed in devotional panels too.<sup>48</sup> It is relevant as well, as Humfrey remarks, that there are fewer altarpieces with the adult Jesus in the middle as the Resurrected Saviour, but this theme may occur more often in Venice than in other Italian cities of the time.<sup>49</sup>

Evidence indicates that such representations were used since early Christianity to stimulate intense feelings of love for Jesus. Such an affective response is illustrated in an often-quoted letter written by Pope Gregory the Great. In answer to a request for devotional images from Secundinus he claims, “you are inflamed in your soul by love of Him”, after looking daily at the body of Jesus:

Your request for images pleases us greatly, since you seek with all Your heart and all intentness of Him, whose picture you wish to have before your eyes, so that, being so accustomed to the daily corporeal sight, when you see an image of Him you are inflamed in your soul by love of Him Whose picture you wish to see.<sup>50</sup>

It is relevant to the context of the *Saviour* that the Byzantine models of devotional art were also revered in Venice, because of the city’s historic connections with Constantinople. As Goffen elaborates, “To any Venetian, the Byzantine allusions of a sacred image were appropriate and rich with significance”<sup>51</sup>:

...it was in Venice that the models of the Byzantine East were considered more sacrosanct than elsewhere in the West, in Venice that the Greek Christians settled when they were expelled from Constantinople in 1453.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Humfrey, *Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup>Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup>Humfrey, *Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, p. 65.

<sup>50</sup>Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 26.

Little is known about Quirizio da Murano, but it is recorded that he trained in the Vivarini workshop, which was regarded as the Bellinis' most important artistic rival in Venice. On a map of Murano in Macadam's guide to Venice a location marked "Ponte Vivarini" underscores the importance of the Vivarini family in this location.<sup>53</sup> Giovanni Bellini was a close contemporary to Quirizio, and a teenage prodigy active in Venice in the decade just prior to 1460, when Bynum records Quirizio as beginning to make his mark on the cultural life of Venice. Goffen writes that by 1459 Bellini was in his twenties and living on his own, in the parish of San Lio in Venice.<sup>54</sup> Alvisio Vivarini, like Quirizio, was a contemporary of Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna.<sup>55</sup> Although the Vivarini family produced many types of devotional images, they seem to have been followers rather than great innovators, and they relied on artistic inventions attributed to Giovanni Bellini.

Certain elements seen in the *Saviour*, such as the Renaissance-style ornament on the throne, the way the background landscape is painted, and the manner in which the wounds are positioned and represented, are more like Bellini than the Vivarini. Since it is clear that Quirizio was as inspired by the Bellini as the work of the Vivarini, it is worthwhile to follow developments in Giovanni's career, as they relate to this period in his life. It is especially revealing to explore the practices that Bellini introduced to devotional art and which are paralleled by artistic strategies evident in the *Saviour*. An analysis of contemporary artworks by Bellini serves to remind us how the work by

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<sup>53</sup>Macadam states that between 1441 and 1450, Murano "was the seat of a famous school of painters, headed by Ant. Vivarini and Giov. D'Alemagna," A. Macadam, *Venice / Alta Macadam; maps and plans drawn by John Flower*. London, 1986, p. 188.

<sup>54</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, (footnote 24), p. 8.

<sup>55</sup>Humfrey, *Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, p. 218. In the late 1480s Alvisio Vivarini worked together with Giovanni Bellini, at replacing Fabriano and Pisanello's frescos, in the Palazzo Ducale in Venice.

Quirizio is not unusual but rather characterizes Venetian art of the period, so we can assume that pictorial devices like one-point perspective and architectural framing are part of an evolving response by painters to express contemporary religious themes.

A particularly relevant fifteenth-century example of the devotional model from Venice is Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna and Sleeping Child*. This image is dated to 1455 and is one of Giovanni's earliest works (fig. 26).<sup>56</sup> Gilbert points out that before Giovanni Dominici promoted such painted images of Jesus asleep with his mother, the motif was uniquely Venetian, and was meant to prefigure the Pietà.<sup>57</sup> Goffen reminds us that Giovanni Bellini is known for his references to the eucharist and the passion in his early Madonnas. As with this example, the nude, sleeping body of Jesus is represented as an infant on an altar-like parapet, which is intended to signify his corporeal death and sacrifice in the eucharist.<sup>58</sup> The parapet acts as a perspectival tool to give the illusion of accessibility, and at the same time to divide the physical world from the sacred. Goffen explains that the parapet also symbolizes the altar in Bellini's art, "where the sacred and earthly spheres meet, where one is accessible to the other, when Christ's sacrifice is reenacted in the celebration of the Mass".<sup>59</sup> I would suggest that the size and placement of the throne in the *Saviour* altarpiece by Quirizio would also seem to make Jesus more accessible, while dividing the sacred and physical worlds.

Behind Jesus and Mary, a landscape with glimpses of silvery canals winds toward distant hills. The faraway horizon is at the same level as Mary's shoulders and sets her

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<sup>56</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 28.

<sup>57</sup>Gilbert, "Tuscan observants and Painters in Venice", p. 110.

<sup>58</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 34.

<sup>59</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 28.

head against the cloud filled sky, giving her a “luminous aura of sanctity”.<sup>60</sup> Goffen notices that in the *Davis Madonna* Bellini introduced a landscape background, which is “predominantly sky,” with a low horizon, which the artist mainly used “from this point on” in his devotional images.<sup>61</sup> Goffen proposes that Bellini used such landscape settings for his images because the viewer sees “the dead man, not the triumphant King of Heaven, and the locus of his sacrificial death is in this world”.<sup>62</sup> As in the *Madonna*, behind Jesus in the *Saviour* there is also a landscape with a low horizon and an expansive cloudy sky. As noted previously in this paper, the contour of a distant hill on the horizon, whose inferred peak culminates precisely behind the wound in the *Saviour*, guides the viewer’s attention directly to the upper-body wound.

The ornately carved throne in the *Saviour* hints, too, at an architectural device promoted by Giovanni Bellini, which capitalized on the idea of penetration and the notion of seeing through to the divine in devotional art. Humfrey writes that, in about 1470, with the *St. Catherine of Siena* altarpiece, Giovanni created an authentically Venetian type known as the *sacra conversazione*, which later became a standard adopted by younger artists like Alvise Vivarini and Cima da Conegliano. Bellini’s approach involved creating an illusionistic effect with the use of Renaissance style frames by linking the pictorial architecture and the frame. A low viewpoint, which Giovanni adopted from Mantegna, was designed to correlate to a spectator standing a few feet in front of the altar. This innovation heightens the illusion of spatial continuity behind the proscenium of the frame.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, Goffen compares to similar work dated 1487. pp. 49-52.

<sup>62</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 79.

<sup>63</sup>Humfrey, *Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, p. 186.

Although, as Humfrey discusses, the altarpiece panel to the *St. Catherine of Siena* altar is now missing, the altar and frame remain at SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice (fig. 27). Considering the remarkable resemblance between the decoration on the frame of the *St. Catherine of Siena* altarpiece and the throne in the *Saviour*, we may speculate that the *Saviour* was designed for an altar and frame that also capitalized on the idea of penetration and the concept of seeing through to the divine, as with the *St. Catherine of Siena* (and Bellini's *S. Giobbe* altarpiece).<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, an altarpiece panel dated to the early 1470s, and also attributed to Giovanni Bellini, could have significant relevance to our understanding of the pictorial conventions in the *Saviour*. This full-length image represents Mary enthroned, while gazing down at the symbolic sleep of Jesus, as a child in her lap (fig. 28). There are distinct similarities between the two compositions, such as the low horizon, low viewpoint and the fact that Mary is seated on a centrally-placed throne that resembles Jesus' throne in the *Saviour*. This iconographic model was a favorite of Giovanni's. As Goffen writes, "much later Bellini depicted the dead Christ in essentially the same position used for this Child".<sup>65</sup>

Another innovation evident in both the *Madonna* and the *Saviour* concerns the downward gaze Bellini often used with his subjects. Ringbom writes that this "invention" of Giovanni's represents a model for a revolutionary way of expressing grief during the quattrocento. The bold use of this "simple device" achieves the desired "solemnity and

<sup>64</sup>Humfrey notes Antonio's younger brother Bartolomeo Vivarini's reluctant adoption of Giovanni's invention, *Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, pp. 201-203.

<sup>65</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 41. The author is referring to Giovanni Bellini's *Pieta*, in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, shown in Plate 25, in *Giovanni Bellini*.

thoughtful mood”, also observed in other devotional images of the period.<sup>66</sup> The sympathetic portrayal of Jesus’ downward gaze in the *Saviour* clearly echoes Giovanni’s sensitively rendered depictions of this gaze. In the *Saviour* only a part of the pupil and iris can be glimpsed below Jesus’ lowered eyelids, conveying a detached, interior look combined with sympathetic understanding. Similar to the downward gaze of Mary in representations of the Madonna, Jesus in the *Saviour* evokes a feeling in the viewer akin to the “commingled sadness and seriousness of purpose” of Bellini’s absorbing, icon-like images.<sup>67</sup>

### **Images, Spiritual Vision and the Theme of Self-Knowledge**

To understand how a late-medieval religious might have viewed the altarpiece, it is important to review some key ideas about the nature of vision in the medieval period. Suzanne Biernoff notes that the primary types of spiritual discipline— enclosure of the senses, sensitivity to visual experience, and forms of analogy— all capitalized on the connection between bodily and interior sight. Spiritual vision involved regulation of the senses, but spiritual truths might also be grasped by visual contemplation of material likenesses. Biernoff recalls that, while flesh was a “loaded signifier and a volatile condition”, corporeal vision was rarely acknowledged as a “means of *participation*” in the divine before the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>68</sup> Because religion claimed that invisible or spiritual things could be made manifest in the visible world such as with the elevation of the host, spiritual vision was crucial to humanity’s return to God. Biernoff

<sup>66</sup>Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, p. 82.

<sup>67</sup>Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 34.

<sup>68</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p.111.

reminds us that looking is a “physiological process” as well as a cultural practice.<sup>69</sup>

Instead of looking away from the world, the spiritual seeker was advised to look *through* it.<sup>70</sup>

Biernoff observes that, from the thirteenth century, the possibility of divinity in daily life made the visibility of Jesus essential in order to prove his existence. Through visual experiences, such as the act of elevating the host, vision became more central in private devotion and communal religious life.<sup>71</sup> From around 1200 the desire to see representations of Jesus also led to a significant increase in private and public devotional images and relics.<sup>72</sup> As Wood has elaborated, the Poor Clares of early-modern Italy were often the recipients of such devotional images and objects from donors. These works of art decorated the Poor Clare’s “external and internal” churches. In this way the visual arts coexisted with and complemented the Clares’ vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, which signified the “primacy of the celestial over the worldly” in their lives.<sup>73</sup>

Biernoff explains that spiritual vision is “roughly equivalent to medieval theories of imagination”. The author also refers to Augustine, who claims that spiritual vision is ‘the kind of vision by which we represent in thought the images of bodies even in their absence’.<sup>74</sup> For instance, expressions of desire by the separated lovers in the Song of Songs were intended to remind monastic men and women of the pain of their own loneliness and longing and direct it toward desire for Jesus. Casey clarifies that such

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<sup>69</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 112.

<sup>71</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 133.

<sup>72</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>73</sup>Wood, *Women, Art, and Spirituality*, p. 119.

<sup>74</sup>Augustine quoted in *Sight and Embodiment*, pp. 25-26. At this moment it seems appropriate to remind the reader, that as we have already observed, it seems that medieval “lesbian” love poems rely more on the Song of Songs and its the theme of longing, separation, and hope for union with the object of love, than love poems written by men.

experiential awareness of the vulnerability of the flesh leads to dissatisfaction with the “answers and satisfactions” offered by earthly life.<sup>75</sup> By making the vulnerability of the flesh more observable through self-knowledge, the soul’s gaze can then be redirected toward the more powerful constancy that is obtainable with spiritual desire.<sup>76</sup>

Biernoff argues that, during the medieval period, spiritual vision was conceived as both the opposite and the equivalent of bodily sight.<sup>77</sup> For many Christians, spiritual and bodily vision was the same.<sup>78</sup> Devotional practices became focused on visual perceptions of the divine and techniques of interior visualization were also developed.<sup>79</sup> In the series of sermons he wrote on the Song of Songs Bernard had introduced the concept of self-knowledge, using reading or hearing texts from the Song as a strategy to stimulate interior vision.<sup>80</sup> Internal vision also required the regulation of physical sensation, especially sight through enclosure of the senses.<sup>81</sup> Through the process of sensory deprivation the desires of the flesh become more visible and an immediate spatial and visual awareness of the inner self, known as self-knowledge, is acquired.<sup>82</sup> As we have gathered from the concepts outlined here experiencing scriptural texts like the Song of Songs and the imagery of the wound, assisted women in pre-modern Venice to develop a sense of spiritualized internal vision.

The inevitable conclusion, then, is that the altarpiece known as the *Saviour*, is the consequence of an interaction of a number of frames of reference important in late-fifteenth century Venice. As the preceding pages have also proposed, the painting

<sup>75</sup>Casey, *Thirst for God*, p. 157.

<sup>76</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 118.

<sup>77</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, pp. 135-36.

<sup>79</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 3.

<sup>80</sup>Casey, *Thirst for God*, pp. 153-54.

<sup>81</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 125.

<sup>82</sup>Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, p. 116.

focuses on the sensual and strongly visual element involved in an intimate encounter with a gender-transcending Jesus. The expressive language from the Song of Songs and the wound in the *Saviour* were intended to move the fleshly pre-modern self from the painful feelings of unrequited human love toward spiritual ecstasy with Jesus. I have shown that during the medieval and pre-modern periods spiritual vision involved enclosure of the bodily senses in the search for self-knowledge. Because it was believed that spiritual things could be made manifest in the visual world, fleshly vision was a way to be sensually involved with the divine. Spiritual discipline took advantage of the relationship between bodily and interior sight through enclosure of the senses, sensitivity to visual experience, and forms of analogy such as the Song of Songs. These ideas would have had particular meaning for the invisible and yet at the same time markedly conspicuous, separately gendered identities of women who longed for love within the convent of Santa Chiara on Murano.

## Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, in order to focus on the idea of Jesus' feminized body as lover to religious women, we have explored the history of the wound iconography in Quirizio da Murano's altarpiece of the *Saviour*. My research has tracked the wound in its migration through various religious and gendered contexts in pre-modern communities. Following the symbol's movement has worked to uncover women's bodily expression in pre-modern religion, as well as troubling binary gender categories and models of heterosexual love that shape today's scholarship.

As the foregoing analysis suggests, I would like to suggest that Jesus' body is portrayed in a potentially queer or troubling way in the *Saviour*. My examination of the *Saviour* has shown that the nuns' lived experience on Murano, especially before the sixteenth century, was rich and complex. It may even have included moments of physiological connection with the *Saviour*, sometimes in actual intimate relationships with other women or in imaginary, sensory environments where inclusive experiences of desire and agency were played out. The bodily expression in the religious practices of monastic women takes on a deeper, more nuanced meaning when we consider the way that audiences continually manipulated visual imagery. By exploring a series of frames of reference in relation to the *Saviour*, it has been possible to shed some light on religious women's experience of sexuality as well as emotion and embodiment in the construction of the pre-modern self. Clearly, visual imagery played an important role in these changes in attitude toward portrayals of gender and sex, a conclusion that has certain implications for the trans-gendered way Jesus is shown in the *Saviour*.

In this study, I hope to have persuaded the reader that, because the study of sexuality between antiquity and modernity has to a great extent been ignored, continued research in this area is necessary in order to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary sexual issues. I would argue that today's scholars should study women's experience of sexuality, emotion and embodiment in the construction of the pre-modern self—the past can add to our present knowledge by providing a radically different perspective on our current belief systems.

Holly tells us, that during the nineteenth century, the cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt organized the dissimilar characteristics of the Italian Renaissance in a way that made the principal visual code of that age more formally concrete and coherent. But, Holly warns us, "In the wide ocean upon which we venture the possible ways and directions are many."<sup>1</sup> As Holly and others suggest, historical images are not limited to only one correct reading. Wimmers's theory of a flexible poetics of reading has been adapted here to render same-sex desire visible.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Holly, *Past Looking*, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>Wimmers, *Poetics of Reading*, p. 29.

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