

THE EROTICS OF THE CRUCIFIX,  
MARY MAGDALENE AND THE POET

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I shall write about the crucifix, the crucified body of Christ, not as a religious text but, rather, as an erotic object. By crucifix I do not refer only to a masculine body nailed to a trunk, but also to the body removed from the cross, the lamentation and the deposition and burial of the dead Christ. Also, this analysis will include those figures which were near the dying and dead Christ.

Various scholars have observed that Christianity, and in particular Roman Catholicism, is a religion which has given great importance to the human body, oscillating between its condemnation as evil incarnate, and its veneration as being God's creation and image. Suffice it to say that the most fundamental belief of Christianity is that following a quasi-natural process whereby a woman becomes a mother while remaining a virgin, God becomes a foetus, a male baby who grows into a full male adult. Leo Steiner, in his classic *The Sexuality of Christ* (1983) observes how Renaissance visual arts, in sync with the dominant contemporary Christian theology, emphasised the human quality of Christ, recognising that which the Church referred to as the theological phenomenon of *kenosis*. So, rather than muting the body, Catholicism (in particular) underlined the somatic quality of its spirituality. Besides the belief that God became a human male, the most obvious sign of this physicality is the Eucharist, whereby the faithful believe that wine and bread change into the blood and body of Christ, which they consume each time they receive the Eucharist during the celebration of mass.

Starting roughly during the Renaissance and continuing during the baroque period, the arts not only depicted Christ in his full masculinity but also

eroticised him. Visual arts went about doing this first by denuding Christ on the cross. Michelangelo's *Resurrected Christ* is a case in point. Christ's body is not only exposed, but it is given an athletic guise.

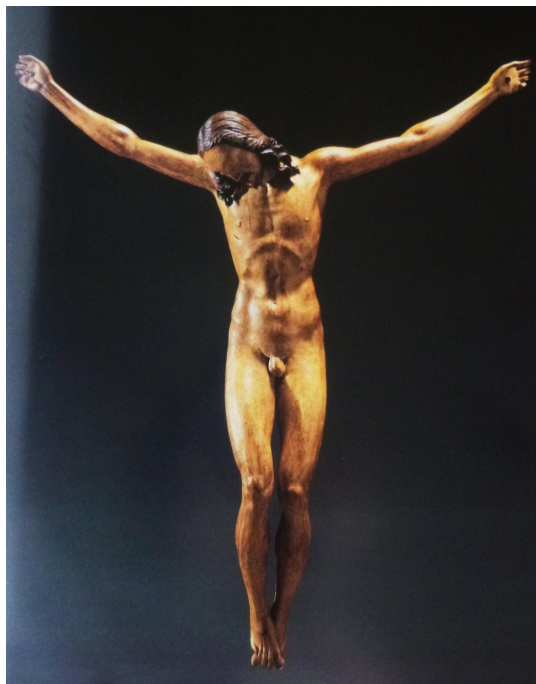


The similarity between this *Risen Christ* and the more known statue of *David* is striking:



The posture, the biceps, the abdominal muscles, the pubic hair and of course, the penis, flaccid and small as per classical Greek esthetics, make the divine body of Christ both beautiful and erotic.

The *Crocifisso Gallino*, also attributed to Michelangelo, is one of many examples of a nude crucified Christ.



The crucified body, as depicted in this work and in, for example, the crucifix of the Santo Spirito in Florence, unlike what Gospels report, show little or no signs of violence.<sup>1</sup> Also noteworthy is the feminine curvature of Christ's body on the cross.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah prophesied that "As many people were aghast at him -- he was so inhumanly disfigured that he no longer looked like a man" (Is 52: 14)

<sup>2</sup> Similar nude crucifixes are those of Donatello and Filippo Brunelleschi among many others from this period.

Paintings of the crucifixion, the lamentation and the burial of Christ from the Renaissance and the Baroque periods portrayed an able-bodied and beautiful Christ. Painters like Jordaens, van Dyk and Rubens, eroticised the dying or dead Christ by the beauty of his body. Death becomes erotic the moment the viewer admires the beauty, the sturdiness and the nudity of the crucified body.

However, it is not only this portrayal of the body of Christ that frames the erotics of the crucifix. Other bodies are accompanying this sensuous Jesus, and it is essential to focus on the dynamics between these bodies. In the lamentation paintings, the closest bodies to Christ's corpse are that of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. While the Virgin marks the virtue of chastity as the immaculate body<sup>3</sup>, Magdalene serves as a counterpoint: she is held to be, even if textually erroneously, the sinner, ex-prostitute, the body which has been used for sexual pleasure and which played a sensual game when anointing Christ's feet with valuable balms and wiping them with her hair. In the Christian imaginary, Magdalene is all about sex and lustful rituals. Painters have always painted Magdalene with her long hair loose,<sup>4</sup> Scantly dressed and sensuous. Ippolito Borghese's *Penitent Magdalene* is only one example:

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<sup>3</sup> See Warner (1976), Rubin (2010)

<sup>4</sup> Women's hair has traditionally been considered a powerful sexual signifier. See Miller (1997, 54) and Cristofovici (2009, 35)



Like many others, Borghese restates the myth of Magdalene as the chastened sex worker when in fact her story is different.<sup>5</sup> One can also observe references to this myth in the crucifixion and lamentation paintings. Generally, of all the bodies present on the Golgotha scene, it is only Magdalene's which appears bareheaded, seductively dressed and in very close proximity to Christ's naked body. Mary the Mother, on the other hand, is generally depicted somewhat aloof, barely touching the body of her dead son, and looking skywards, thus stating her saintly, virtuous character, as opposed to the worldly and sinful Magdalene.

Rubens's *The Lamentation* can serve as a fitting example of this: blonde Magdalene with her chest almost revealed is holding Christ's hands and

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<sup>5</sup> On the controversial character of Mary Magdalene see, for example, Bourgeault (2010) and Haag (2016).

looking at the viewer as if to seduce, while the Virgin Mary looks up to underline her spirituality and saintliness.



Jacob Jordaens's interpretation of the same episode is similar to that of Rubens's, and the sexual game between Jesus and Magdalene gets more pronounced by the Virgin Mary's remoteness:



The eroticisation of the body of Christ, particularly when crucified, is also a literary phenomenon. This continues underlining the fact that Christianity is a religion of the body and that ultimately, spiritual wholeness is reached through the body. Salvation, in Christian terms, would not have been possible without God becoming a body put to death. But bodily experiences include erotic sensations and therefore it is impossible to avoid these when the body is so central to a complex set of beliefs such as a religion.

In the introduction to his book *Closet Devotions* (1998) Richard Rambuss maintains that it is not possible to study Christian literature without noticing the element of affection and sex. One cannot but observe how the literature written by Christian saints is abundant with references to the body and sex. For example, many female mystics thought of themselves as being Christ's betrothed: Catherine of Alexandria and Catherine of Siena both thought of



themselves as being Christ's wife and that this marriage was endorsed and blessed by the Virgin Mary. It was not just the female mystics who eroticised their relationship with Christ: male poets too have done it over time. Some of the metaphysical poets, like the cleric John Donne, addressed Christ as a lover, as a beautiful lover. George Herbert, a poet and a priest in the Church of England, was one of the most prominent of the metaphysical poets. The amorous tone with which Herbert addresses Christ as he meditates on the crucifixion runs parallel to what the Renaissance and Baroque painters did in their work.

Thou art *my loveliness*, my life, my light,

*Beauty* alone to me:

Thy bloody death and undeserved, makes thee

Pure red and white.

("Dullness", my emphases)

The "bloody death" of Christ becomes an erotic spectacle as Herbert focuses on the white body and the red blood coming out of it. In the poem, as in the paintings of the crucifixion, death is transformed into an erotic game, where the viewer (Herbert) is enticed by the dead body of Christ, which is described as lovely.

Herbert describes his relationship to Christ as intimate. In "The Search", Herbert addresses Jesus as "my Love" as he searches for him and professes his need of being one with him. At this point, one has to tackle the issue related to

sexuality – whether this approach is just metaphorical or whether it reveals a homosexual attraction to the dying Jesus. The question becomes even more compelling after reading Herbert's "To John Leaning on the Lord's Breast":

Ah now, glutton, let me suck too!  
You won't really hoard the whole  
Breast for yourself! Do you thieve  
Away from everyone that common well?  
He also shed his blood for me,  
And thus, having rightful  
Access to the breast, I claim the milk  
Mingled with the blood.  
Ah now, glutton, let me suck too!  
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Breast for yourself! Do you thieve  
Away from everyone that common well?  
He also shed his blood for me,  
And thus, having rightful  
Access to the breast, I claim the milk  
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John's leaning on his Master's breast, as reported by himself in his gospel (John 13:23) is, of course, a demonstration of the apostle's intimacy with Christ, suggesting to some a homosexual attraction between the two, especially since

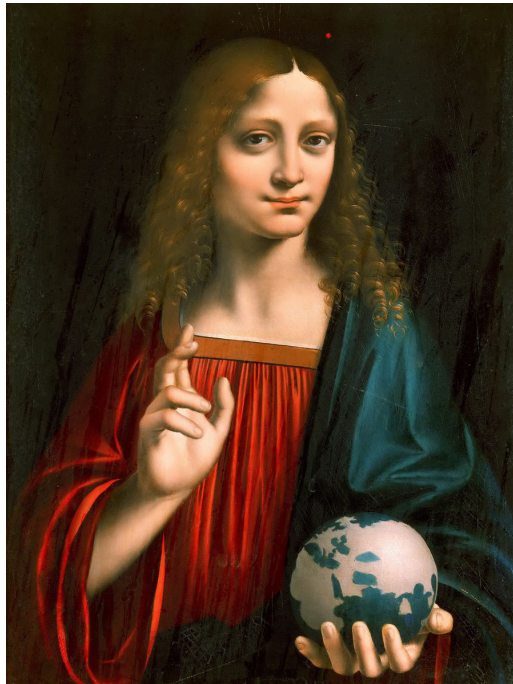
John is described as “the disciple Jesus loved”.<sup>6</sup> Herbert associates the breast to milk, even though Christ is male. Could this be a case of homosexual erotica, or a transexualisation of Christ, taking the (female) role of a mother? Carolyn Bynum has argued that in Medieval times, Christ was perceived as androgynous. This notion was not, of course, the result of a belief that Jesus belonged to some third sex, but that the perception of Christ as the giver of nutrition associated him with the traditional perception of motherhood. Bynum argues for Christ's androgyny in her book *Jesus as Mother*. She comes to this conclusion through her observation of several paintings and visuals showing an effeminate Christ. Indeed Quirizio da Murano’s Christ the Saviour is one example of a feminine looking Christ taking the role of nourisher.



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<sup>6</sup> See, Aelred of Rievaulx (2013) where the relationship between the two is described as a marriage.

Christ's androgyny in Marco D'Oggiono's *Salvator Mundi* is even more explicit.



This particular aspect of Jesus's sexuality was also registered in the writings of several mystics. In her meditations about humanity's relationship to Christ, Julian of Norwich writes:

And thus I saw that God rejoiceth that He is our Father, and god rejoiceth that He is our Mother, and god rejoiceth that He is our Very Spouse and our soul is His loved Wife.

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Thus our Lady is our Mother in whom we are all enclosed and of her born, in Christ: (for she that is Mother of our Saviour is Mother of all that shall be saved in our Saviour;) and our Saviour is our Very Mother.

Herbert's assertions, then, have to be placed in this context. The intimate relationship claimed to have existed between Jesus and John is also the subject of a poem by another metaphysical poet, Richard Crashaw. In "Sancto Ioanni, Dilecto Discipulo" Crashaw addresses John and tells him to:

Enjoy yourself: hide your head in his majestic bosom, for then it  
Would never wish to be placed on a bed of everlasting roses.

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Enjoy yourself: and while he carries you in his holy bosom thus  
O it will be enough for me to have been able to ride on his back

Crashaw, however, includes himself to form a love relationship between these three men: himself, Jesus and John, as the latter sucks his Master's breast and the poet rides the Master on the back.

The sensual images in these poems cannot but heighten the notion of Jesus as an erotic (and homoerotic) object. Crashaw has the same attitude as that of painters when it comes to his depiction of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. In his poem "On the Wounds of the Lord Hanging (on the Cross)", rather than revulsion he experiences an erotic attraction to the wounded feet of Jesus and even encourages Magdalene to enjoy the time on the Golgotha as Jesus kisses her not by his lips but his feet:

Magdala, you who were accustomed to bring tears and kisses to the  
Sacred foot, take yours in turn from the sacred foot.

The foot has its own mouths, to give your kisses back,  
This clearly is the eye by which it returns your tears.

Crashaw, then, reiterates the sensuous relationship of Jesus and Magdalene, through kisses, feet and blood and eroticises both bodies. The Golgotha, rather than a site of tragedy, becomes a place where two bodies enjoy each other erotically.

In this latter part of my paper I would like to refer to two modern Maltese poets who have also perceived an erotic object on the cross. Doreen Micallef has time and again professed her attraction to religious figures, be them Christ or some other personality. Her verse continuously combines her desired lover with a very masculine Jesus or God. Her religious experiences, which could spread over different faiths, are always somatised and given an erotic bent:

put your lips next to mine  
and tap on my mind yesterday's faith  
anew  
("Prophecy")<sup>7</sup>

This eroticism permits the intimate contact with the divine and we can also detect Magdalene's image on the Golgotha in this next excerpt of Micallef's:

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<sup>7</sup> The translations of the excerpts from Maltese poems are my own.

She caresses  
God  
and  
she sticks to his face  
kissing  
wanting to eat him up  
and wash him with spittle  
("Midday Magic")

Marjanu Vella was a Franciscan monk, a contemporary of Doreen Micallef, who published a number of poetry collections. Like Micallef he somatises his religious experiences, especially those inspired by the crucifixion and, like the metaphysical poets mentioned above, he is particularly drawn to flesh and its effluvia – blood and water. Vella's reflection on the crucifixion, in other words, is not as spiritual as it is bodily.

as I raise my head  
and see him looking intently at me  
as if asking me  
through the look in his eyes  
to remove the thorns from his head  
to wipe the blood off his hands.  
("The Crucifix's Head")

The reader immediately observes the intimate contact, even if only through the eyes, between Jesus and the poet. But there is another, inconspicuous, message in this excerpt. The paintings of the lamentation of the Golgotha, of which we saw the examples of Rubens and Jordaens, do suggest it was Magdalene who took care to remove the thorns from the dead Christ, and who must have wiped the blood. So we might propose that Vella is implying the presence of Magdalene in his meditation on the crucifix but there is no mention of her. Instead, in the next stanza, the poet gets closer to the dying Jesus:

Sometimes I felt something telling me  
To stop near him and pray  
And kiss a thousand times  
The wounds on his feet.

Of course, there are echoes of Crashaw's poem about Mary Magdalene here, but in fact, what Vella does in his poetry is more complex. Vella is hinting at a process of self-transgenderising, through which he transforms himself into Mary Magdalene. So, in Vella's case, transgenderism does not, as in Bynum's observations, happen to Jesus, but to himself. The poet-monk becomes a woman, Mary Magdalene, who cleanses the dead body of Christ and who expresses her love and erotic attraction to the dead body by kissing it a thousand kisses. Interestingly, Vella does not choose the Madonna's body to transgender into, but the more sensuous, the more erotically charged body of Magdalene, precisely because the attraction to the dying Christ is physical



more than spiritual. The poet gazes at the Crucifix through Magdalene's desiring eyes:

Stretched, his arms nailed  
On the wooden cross:  
Blood trickling calmly  
On the milky body  
("Warped Wood")

Here too, as in Crashaw's poem quoted above, there is a reference to milk. Vella does not taste this milk but sees it in the whiteness of Christ's body. The blood trickling calmly gives more of an erotic feel to the poem and significantly reduces the violence on the body.

The gaping wound spits out  
The remaining blood.  
His very toe nails get soiled  
And the ground is full of blood drops.

The violated body becomes ever more beautiful as the open wound on Jesus's side emits blood, so much blood that it reaches the feet – of course, another hidden reference to Magdalene. The Golgotha, again, is transformed into a beautiful site, where two lovers – Jesus and Magdalene – profess their love physically and erotically. Vella, now fully transformed into Magdalene, approaches the dying Christ:

May I, at this moment,  
Approach you?  
And tell you a long long word  
In your ears?

("Warped Wood")

Of course, this "long long word" is "I love you", the most treasured and intimate expression between lovers. It is the word lovers express when they feel the desire of the other body with which they share their passion. Just like the painters we referred to above, Vella does not dismiss the crucifix as an object of abjection, but, on the contrary, is drawn to it as a source of physical beauty. In his poem, "The Lover" he gazes at a tired Christ, but the description he gives of his face is anything but abject; instead, he fixes his gaze at the "coral red lips/ full of words."

The crucifix, then, is a site of erotic games, where even if the motivation to gaze at it is originally spiritual, the carnality of it demands or seduces lookers to transform a tragic story into a sexual event. Christ's nudity, Magdalene's sensuousness meet the desire of the artist to form a play of three or to transform oneself according to the self's desires.

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