CHAPTER SIX

IRONY AND REALISM IN THE ICONOGRAPHY OF CARAVAGGIO’S

PENITENT MAGDALENE

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Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610) is often considered one of the most important painters in western art. Born near Milan, he was a pioneer of the baroque, and, through his imagery, a force for the Roman Catholic Counter Reformation. His brand of realism and advocacy of chiaroscuro light effects were particularly influential. During his mercurial tenure in Rome between 1593 and 1606 the resurgent city eclipsed Florence as a place where artists flocked because church patronage created an abundant amount of commissions. While he produced around 100 known paintings in his brief lifetime, some as a fugitive from the law after his flight to Naples, Malta, and Sicily between 1606 and his death in 1610, the bulk of his oeuvre was produced in Rome. His primary patron, Cardinal Francesco del Monte and his associates, supported his endeavors in some capacity until his death.

Cardinal Francesco Maria Bourbon del Monte (1549–1627) was an aristocratic prelate in Rome. Connected to the Medici in Tuscany, he represented their interests in addition to those of France. Born in Venice where Titian attended his christening, he was educated in Urbino and rose in the church ranks because of Medici favor. As a church diplomat and connoisseur of the arts with interests in science,¹ he was instrumental in advancing reforms in art and music. While he may have been a potential candidate for the papacy, his advocacy of Galileo and Caravaggio and his artistic tastes would not have endeared him to his colleagues in the

Acknowledgments are made to Prof. Dr. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, Direktorin of the Bibliotheca Hertziana, (Max Planck Institute for Art History) in Rome to whom the author is indebted for her sage comments in Venice at the Renaissance Society of America Meeting when an excerpt of this paper was presented and also for her reading of drafts of this paper.

College of Cardinals, particularly those representing Spain. Of all of his triumphs he may be most famous as the tolerant and even indulgent patron of Caravaggio, who was often in trouble with the law.

While the significance of Cardinal del Monte will be revisited in the following paragraphs, it is important to turn to Caravaggio’s famous *Penitent Magdalen* and the ironic details that it possesses. Some of the irony in Caravaggio’s painting of the *Penitent Magdalen* (122.5 × 98.5 cm) c. 1594,² includes his portrayal of the Magdalene with a minimum of iconographic flourish relative to portraits of her in prior and contemporary depictions. What may seem at first as iconographic austerity is paired with a realism not seen in art where allegory may play a subsidiary role (fig. 6.1). In all but the representation of his female sitter, the painting’s visual *detail* adheres to “strictest Counter-Reformation orthodoxy” even though tradition identifies the Magdalene as a penitent prostitute.³ Such ambiguity—“unconventional . . . perilously close to confusing the sacred and profane”⁴ is an undercurrent in Caravaggio’s treatment of the Magdalene as a popular subject. This also became a crux for Christological theology of a penitent who somehow foresees the redemptive death of Christ. On the other hand, Caravaggio is clearly faithful to biblical and other hagiographic texts but primarily in a subtlety often lost on his detractors. That this painting in the Doria Pamphilij Gallery in Rome is also one of his early religious paintings is also important, because at the start of his career he was relatively earnest in seeking church commissions and less iconoclastic than after he had secured Cardinal Del Monte’s unwavering patronage.

**Overview of the Painting**

Caravaggio’s novel style of highlighting his human subject in light and muting the simple background is evident in his *Penitent Magdalen*. This technique, usually known as *chiaroscuro*, became especially pronounced in Caravaggio’s later paintings and was borrowed by many subsequent Baroque artists including Hendrik Ter Bruggen and Rembrandt among

⁴ Brown, “Between the Sacred and the Profane,” 292.