CHAPTER EIGHT

MICHELANGELO’S NOLI ME TANGERE FOR VITTORIA COLONNA, AND THE CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

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Michelangelo’s lost Noli me tangere cartoon for Vittoria Colonna is known to us today through the painted copies of Pontormo (1531), Bronzino (1531–32) (fig. 8.1), and Battista Franco (1537). These paintings bear witness to the originality of Michelangelo’s composition, which defies iconographical expectations established for scenes of the Noli me tangere. In these beautiful and moving images, the plaintive, hurried agitation of Saint Mary Magdalene contrasts with the quiet, calming majesty of the risen Christ. Almost equal in stature with the risen Christ, the Magdalene does not kneel, but stands to Christ’s right. Even more surprisingly, Christ reaches out to touch her chest, subverting our expectations about the meaning of the scriptural passage on which it was based (John 20:11–18) and the actions that it implies. Michelangelo’s innovative interpretation of the subject, as manifest in the painted copies, focuses on the Magdalene’s privilege and the worth and redemptive power of her words and deeds, rather than her sinful past and penitence, as was typical of other renditions of the Noli me tangere. By celebrating the empowered aspects of the Magdalene’s identity, this painting participates visually in the debate raging in humanist and theological circles over the status of women in religion and society, and reflects the role of its patron, Vittoria Colonna, in this debate.

The NOLI ME TANGERE in Word and Image

The textual source for images of the Noli me tangere is the Gospel of John (20:11–18). According to the text, Mary of Magdala visits Christ’s tomb on the Sunday morning after the Crucifixion, weeps at the sight of the empty tomb, and then peers into it again to see two angels dressed in white. After complaining to the angels that someone has removed Christ’s body, she turns toward someone she believes to be a gardener, who asks why she weeps. When she asks if it was he who removed the body, he does not
Fig. 8.1. Agnolo Bronzino, *Noli me tangere* (after Michelangelo), c. 1532, panel. Casa Buonarotti, Florence, Italy. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.